

**TO BE MY OWN MISTRESS:
WOMEN IN JAMAICA, ATLANTIC SLAVERY, AND THE CREATION OF BRITAIN'S AMERICAN
EMPIRE, 1660-1770**

by

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LIST OF ABBREVIATIONS

BL	British Library, London, England
BRO	Bristol Record Office, Bristol, England
ESRO	East Sussex Record Office, Lewes, England
HL	Henry E. Huntington Library, San Marino, California
IRO	Island Record Office, Twickenham Park, Jamaica
JA	Jamaica Archives, Spanish Town, Jamaica
LPL	Lambeth Palace Library, London, England
NAE	The National Archives of England, Kew, England
NAS	National Archives of Scotland, Edinburgh, Scotland
NLJ	National Library of Jamaica, Kingston, Jamaica
NLS	National Library of Scotland, Edinburgh
WCL	William L. Clements Library, The University of Michigan, Ann Arbor, Michigan
WMQ	<i>The William and Mary Quarterly</i>

ABSTRACT

This dissertation conceives of Jamaica, the wealthiest and largest slave-holding colony in the Atlantic World, as emblematic of the extraordinarily lucrative, yet profoundly exploitative practices that forged colonial societies throughout the British Empire. By 1768, nearly 167,000 enslaved people lived on the island. I demonstrate that free women of European and African descent were crucial investors in the expansion of American slavery, from which they derived considerable financial, legal, and social benefits. In addition to inheriting slaves, women across the social spectrum actively bought, sold, managed, and punished slaves. As consumers and purveyors of enslaved people, they increased the demand for the forcible transport of more slaves to America, and helped to intensify the British slave trade.

My study offers an alternative to the highly gendered commonplace assumption that free women were marginal to the growth of slavery. Using government papers, probated wills and inventories, personal correspondence, and court records, I analyze the crucial roles they played in shaping the contours of imperial settlement. This research suggests that patriarchal and paternalistic ideologies were less important to the formation of slaveholding societies in America than has commonly been understood. While colonists sustained the hierarchal power relations that were inherent in patriarchal organizations, they altered the character of these dynamics. Controlling a numerically dominant enslaved population took precedence over policing gender

differences. More egalitarian relations between free men and women facilitated British colonialism and the propagation of chattel slavery in America.

PROLOGUE

During the first century of British settlement, Jamaica was simultaneously a frontier society, a major trading depot, and a contested borderland situated at the heart of the Caribbean Sea within striking distance of Spanish Hispaniola and French Saint-Domingue. By the eighteenth century, its sugar plantations, fueled by the labor of hundreds of thousands of enslaved Africans, generated vast wealth for a small minority of white planters and merchants. The island was far larger and more ecologically diverse than any other British-held island in the Caribbean. With its coastal plains and soaring mountains, Jamaica bore little resemblance to Barbados, which was flat, unvaried, and miniscule in comparison. Yet, in spite of its size and large swaths of unsettled land, the colony was still an island, and the coast was never far off. For some, the Caribbean Sea augured profits to be made from trade; for others, the blue waters promised escape or turned the island into a prison.

The English settled Jamaica slowly and haphazardly from the 1650s through the 1770s, establishing a patchwork of parishes that varied in age, character, population density, and crop production. The cool, densely forested mountains—where small landholders who owned a few slaves and eked out livings growing cocoa, coffee, and subsistence farming—contrasted starkly with the hot, flat coastal plains covered in sugarcane, and ruled by the wealthiest planters. In addition to agriculture, the colony

supported an ethnically and religiously diverse merchant community, which worked in the thriving port cities Port Royal and Kingston, and shared much in common with trading partners in New York, Charleston, and Philadelphia. On the one hand, diversity characterized the colony: diversity of geography, climate, agricultural produce, and cultures. On the other hand, a large and predominantly African slave majority stood as the unvarying, defining feature of island society after 1690. My dissertation at the highest level explores how free people of European and African descent built such a magnificently wealthy colony with such a high cost in human life.

In 1655, nobody in England or its American colonies would have predicted Jamaica's rise. English army generals seized the Spanish-controlled island in an attempt to recover from their spectacular failure to seize Hispaniola from Spain, the crux of Oliver Cromwell's secret "Western Design": a military strategy to threaten Spanish power in the Caribbean. After destroying Jamaica's one Spanish town, Cromwell's soldiers occupied the island as a military post. Few survived the early years of starvation and disease, when the soldiers became so desperate "for want of food" that they stole and ate the officers' horses.¹ The island's first English planters were veterans of the Design and received land grants in lieu of pay.² In 1661, soon after his restoration, Charles II made Jamaica a royal colony.

It was Charles II and his brother James II who sowed the seeds for the island's involvement in African slavery. The King and the Duke of York were sponsors of and major investors in the Royal African Company, formed in 1663. They devised a strategy

¹ Edward D'Oyley, 1656, "Extracts from Col. D'Oyley's Journal, relating to Jamaica, 1653-1661," Add. Mss., 12410, BL.

² Michael Craton and James Walvin, *A Jamaica Plantation: The History of Worthy Park, 1670-1970* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1970), 18.

with Thomas Modyford, the Governor of Barbados, to turn Jamaica into the new Barbados. Modyford had established a profitable enterprise, selling slaves imported by the Royal African Company to Barbados to neighboring Spanish settlements in the Americas.³ Jamaica, located in the heart of the Spanish Caribbean in close proximity to Central America, would be an even better slave-trading depot. The Crown appointed Modyford Governor of Jamaica in 1664, and he travelled with nearly 1,000 Barbadian colonists, who were lured to the new territory by the promise of free land.⁴ But, during the 1670s and 1680s, a series of political crises diverted English attention from America as the Popish Plot (1679) and the Exclusion Crisis (1679-1684) threatened to unleash another civil war. Neglect ensued. With limited Crown involvement, Jamaica's governors allowed a lawless and profit oriented culture to take root.⁵ By the 1670s, Port Royal, the colony's main town, boasted a flamboyantly decadent, pluralistic, and often hedonistic culture. Pirates and privateers used Port Royal as a base for raiding Spanish ships laden with gold and silver from the Spaniards' American mines. Merchants engaged in licit and illicit trade with neighboring Spanish territories. In only a few decades, there emerged a cosmopolitan, ethnically and culturally diverse society on the island that was home to English and Scottish Protestants, Irish Catholics, and a sizeable Jewish community. While enslaved Africans comprised half the population in 1670, they did not yet outnumber free inhabitants. Jamaica, it seemed, would remain a major English trading depot in the Caribbean.

³ Nuala Zahedieh, "Modyford, Sir Thomas, first baronet (c.1620–1679)," in *Oxford Dictionary of National Biography*, ed. Lawrence Goldman, January 2008, <http://www.oxforddnb.com.proxy.lib.umich.edu/view/article/18871>.

⁴ Frank Cundall, *The Governors of Jamaica in the Seventeenth Century* (London: The West India Committee, 1936), 21-22.

⁵ Melissa Mowry examines how partisan political parties whipped up fears that current events threatened to reignite the Civil War. *The Bawdy Politic in Stuart England, 1660–1714: Political Pornography and Prostitution* (Burlington: Ashgate Publishing, 2004), 44.

In the 1680s and 1690s, however, the slave trade accelerated the growth of the African laboring population, destroying the rough parity between free and enslaved people. Planters had begun to establish successful agricultural enterprises, increasing the demand for labor, which European servants could or would never fulfill. At first, sugar was not the primary crop; the settlers initially experimented with growing cocoa, indigo, cotton, ginger, and pimento.⁶ Yet, by the 1690s, the island's defining characteristics—a significant slave majority, appalling mortality rates among the free white population, prodigious wealth, and a culture of violence—were in evidence. In 1693, slaves outnumbered free people six to one.⁷ It is at this point that slave uprisings became a real and ongoing security concern. Between 1673 and 1704, enslaved people actually rebelled six times, and two smaller conspiracies failed to materialize.⁸ Facing a labor force that could easily destroy them, free colonists' treatment of enslaved people grew increasingly brutal. To make matters worse, at the turn of the eighteenth century, slave uprisings coincided with natural disasters and military threats. In 1692, a devastating earthquake killed two thousand inhabitants when one-third of Port Royal sank into the sea. French privateers invaded the island in 1694, exposing the colony's military vulnerability to European rivals. A few years later, a terrible fire destroyed what was left of Port Royal, causing leading citizens to shift across the bay at Kingston.

The killing season did not end at 1700. During the early decades of the eighteenth century, the free population of European descent was decimated by disease, while enslaved Africans were more immune to tropical contagions. A range of maladies

⁶ Burnard, *Planters, Merchants, and Slaves: Plantation Societies in British America, 1650-1820* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2015), 54.

⁷ *Ibid.*, 230.

⁸ *Ibid.*, 98.

plagued them, but malaria and yellow fever—both mosquito-borne, tropical diseases—claimed a majority of lives, young and old. The diseases were horribly painful and, given the standards of early modern European medicine, entirely incurable.⁹ The rise in the number of large plantations during the first half of the eighteenth century made the island an even more deadly place to live. Rapid deforestation and standing pools of water on plantation estates created an ideal breeding ground for disease-carrying insects.

Jamaica's strategic position in the Caribbean, bordered by Spanish, French and Dutch enemies who could potentially capture the island, further destabilized the place. By 1690, England was emerging as one of the Atlantic World's two great naval powers, alongside the French, and therefore a threat to Spanish dominance in the Americas. A decade later, the dynastic alliance of France and Spain through the House of Bourbon set off nearly a century of warfare between France and Britain that played out in Europe, the Americas, and Africa.¹⁰ As the primary trade route between South America and Europe, the Caribbean was a highly strategic arena; as the site of British, French, Spanish, Dutch, and Swedish settlements, it was easily roiled by inter-imperial warfare. Not surprisingly, the colonists in Jamaica looked to Britain's army and navy to protect them against invasion.

Colonists also contended with internal strife during the early eighteenth century. From 1725 to 1739, local militias and the British Army engaged in a long and unsuccessful guerilla war against the island's Maroon population. The Maroons, descendants of escaped African slaves who were brought to Jamaica by the Spanish, attacked and destroyed plantations where they killed planters in an effort to protect their

⁹ John McNeill, *Mosquito Empires: Ecology and War in the Greater Caribbean, 1620-1914* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2010), 33.

¹⁰ McNeill, *Mosquito Empires*, 19-20.

autonomy, way of life, and territory. The Maroons further augmented their numbers with escaped slaves seeking freedom in the densely forested, mountainous interior. Eventually recognizing the offensive against Maroons was futile, the British Army surrendered and signed a treaty with their leader Cudjoe in 1739, granting them freedom and sovereignty over their land in exchange for their assistance in hunting down and returning escaped slaves.

Even as they lived in a highly unstable and, in many respects, inhospitable environment, however, free colonists began to successfully harness slave labor and generate considerable wealth during the first half of the eighteenth century. Mortality rates remained severe, but the free population grew slowly and steadily between 1720 and 1770. People from the British Isles and mainland North America continued to migrate to Jamaica in the hopes of making their fortunes. Colonists created a precarious but diversified society that merged urban life, agriculture, and Atlantic trade. While some spent most of their lives in Kingston and others never left their plantations, most free people moved between the two main towns and the parishes. Planters commonly owned houses in Kingston or Spanish Town, in addition to the great houses that dominated their estates. Indeed, many planters also doubled as merchants, making their presence in Kingston or the smaller port towns all the more necessary. The symbiosis between plantation agriculture and Atlantic trade fostered Jamaica's ascent.

As the historian Kamua Brathwaite has shown, "creole" men and women developed a distinctive culture in Jamaica by combining European and African traditions in a tropical landscape.¹¹ While many of the wealthier colonists aspired to move to the

¹¹ Kamau Brathwaite, *The Development of Creole Society in Jamaica, 1770-1820* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1971).

mother country and live there as absentees (some in fact did do so and managed their plantations from afar), most if not all considered Jamaica home. Islanders built grand government buildings, maintained beautiful churches, patronized theaters and balls, and imported a wealth of material luxury goods and necessities. By 1770, Kingston had become a crucial port city in Anglo-America, a central node in the increasingly networked Atlantic economy. Urban-dwellers lived on streets lined with homes, inns, taverns, shops, stores, apothecaries, and churches. Free men and women decorated these homes with furniture carved from Caribbean mahogany, ate off of imported porcelain made in France, and dressed in silks and linens made in China and India. And in the ultimate display of wealth and power, some travelled in horse-drawn coaches driven by slaves dressed in livery. Whether elite or middling, most free colonists were educated, culturally versatile, and well travelled. Faced with a chronic dearth of local schools and an absence of universities, parents who could afford to do so sent their sons and daughters overseas to be educated; somewhat surprisingly, many of the children eventually returned to the colony, often to oversee family plantations. Whatever the case, in the process, Jamaicans formed and enjoyed close ties with relatives and friends in Britain. But they lived double lives, enjoying what the mother country had to offer, while maintaining active interests in Jamaica. By the middle of the eighteenth century, their island was the richest colony in Anglo-America, and their representatives in London commanded more political power in Britain than those for other parts of the empire.¹²

Slavery fueled Jamaica's rapid development: slaves manned the large-scale production of raw goods—such as sugar and coffee—and their exportation from the

¹² See Perry Gauci, *William Beckford: First Prime Minister of the London Empire* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2013); Andrew Jackson O'Shaughnessy, *An Empire Divided: The American Revolution and the British Caribbean* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2000).

Caribbean to North America, Britain, and beyond. In turn, colonists bought “finished” goods from Britain and Europe, helping to transform metropolitan and colonial economies alike in the eighteenth century. The growth of its colonies in the West Indies, especially Jamaica, helped make Britain one of the two great contenders for global dominance in the eighteenth century.¹³ In 1760, Tacky’s Revolt—a large, coordinated slave uprising that resulted in the deaths of 50 free colonists—terrified slave owners, as it reminded them of their precarious position.¹⁴ Laws regulating slaves and free people of color grew more draconian. Enslaved people formed ninety percent of the island’s majority. Jamaica was far more of an African society than it was European.

As the historian Vincent Brown rightfully recognizes, we must read Jamaican slavery as “representative” of early America “rather than as anomalous.” Yet, the profound violence and inequality in colonial Jamaica does not fit easily into the dominant traditional historical narratives, which treat the colonial American period as a prelude to the American Revolution.¹⁵ In spite of its impressive wealth and power, Jamaica did not sit comfortably with the British public either. While the British Empire continued to benefit directly and indirectly from the West Indies, an uneasy and increasingly vocal critique of slavery and imperial rule gained force during the second half of the eighteenth century. At its end, the political and spiritual costs of incorporating openly exploitative and brutal societies like Jamaica into the British polity grew too high. Jamaica and

¹³ See Trevor Burnard’s analysis of the wealth that Jamaica produced for Britain. *Mastery, Tyranny, and Desire: Thomas Thistlewood and His Slaves in the Anglo Jamaican World* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2004), 14-15.

¹⁴ Vincent Brown has created a useful website detailing and mapping the events of Tacky’s Rebellion. <http://revolt.axismaps.com/index.php>.

¹⁵ Vincent Brown, *The Reaper’s Garden: Death and Power in the World of Atlantic Slavery* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2008), 258-259.

Jamaican slavery would remain part of the empire, but the slave trade that helped create the British Empire was abolished.

INTRODUCTION

“I am not covetous, but as ambitious as ever any of my sex was, is, or can be; which makes, that though I cannot be *Henry* the Fifth, or *Charles* the Second, yet I endeavour to be *Margaret* the *First*; and although I have neither power, time nor occasion to conquer the world as *Alexander* and *Caesar* did; yet rather not to be mistress of one, since Fortune and the Fates would give me none, I have made a world of my own: for which no body, I hope, will blame me, since it is in every one's power to do the like.”

- Margaret Cavendish, *The Blazing World* (1666)¹

Margaret Cavendish published *The Blazing World* in 1666, five years after the Restoration of Charles II. In this utopian satire the main character, a woman, embarks on a fantastical journey to an imaginary “blazing world” world populated by “bear-men,” “fox-men,” and “bird-men.” Believing her to be a goddess, the half-human half-animal creatures make her the Empress of their “blazing world,” which she rules justly. Written by a woman in a literary world dominated by men, *The Blazing World* became a radical text that synthesized Cavendish’s views on natural philosophy, science, religion, and imperialism. Today, it is widely regarded as the first work of science fiction. While Cavendish claimed that she was “as ambitious” as any woman in seventeenth-century England, she could not “conquer” the real world. Instead, she channeled her ambition into writing, creating an imaginary world of her “own” governed by women. She also published *The Blazing World* eleven years after England seized Jamaica from Spain,

¹ Margaret Cavendish, “The Blazing World” in *Margaret Cavendish: Political Writings* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003), 6.

when real women were embarking on voyages from the British Isles, Barbados, North America, and Africa to the remote and exotic Caribbean outpost. Some travelled with their families, lured by the promise of free land and future wealth. Other women—indentured servants, vagrants, prison convicts, and slaves—were coerced into travelling to this “new world.” They anticipated years of hard labor and dreamt of escaping the “fates” that fortune had dealt them. Once settled on the island, free women claimed the power Cavendish could only dream of wielding. They became their own mistresses, but not in the way the author had envisioned. In the “blazing world” of Jamaica, a woman was not just the mistress of herself: she also became the mistress of enslaved Africans, whom she ruled with nearly absolute power.

The free women who lived during the first century of British colonization in Jamaica comprised a diverse group. Some were born into wealthy families. They were white, privileged, and powerful. Others were born into slavery, achieved the status of being free, and preciously guarded it. The majority fell somewhere in between these extremes. From the late seventeenth century to the mid-eighteenth century, free women aided the transition to the slave labor regime that would come to define Jamaica. They bought, sold, inherited, freed, and even kidnapped slaves. Regardless of race, marital status, or economic position, women saw slave ownership as an ordinary, necessary feature of colonial life. Their actions in local and Atlantic markets, in courtrooms, on plantations, and in families reveal how chattel slavery structured the daily practices of all free people regardless of their gender.

Most of the free women were not only mistresses of themselves: they also wielded nearly absolute power over others. A woman acting as her own mistress was, in

many respects, anathema to early modern gender conventions. The majority of Jamaica's inhabitants came from a British cultural milieu in which women were assumed to be the natural subordinates of men. They were the weaker sex: less capable, less intelligent, and certainly less qualified to rule others. Thus, being born male or female profoundly shaped one's life trajectory, and strong cultural expectations influenced a woman's possibilities.² Maintaining unequal relations between the sexes had both social and political significance. The hierarchical relationship between the sexes mirrored relations between master and servant, parent and child, lord and vassal, priest and parishioner, King and subject, and—ultimately—God and man. My title is thus designed to raise questions about, as much as assert, women's autonomy. How did slaveholding constitute women's autonomy or subjectivity? What colonial circumstances made it possible for them to be full participants in the slave system? How did women help turn Jamaica into the largest slaveholding colony in the Anglo-Atlantic world?

Gender difference was fundamental to the formation of a patriarchal social hierarchy, which remained the British ideal of social order throughout the eighteenth century. The superior, natural, and religiously sanctioned right of men to monopolize political, economic, and social authority, from which women were excluded by law, force, custom, education, and tradition formed the basis of a patriarchal society.³ However Britain's expanding American empire unsettled older modes of organizing society, making the ideal of stability predicated on masculine authority difficult to realize,

² I adhere to Joan Scott's definition of gender as a socially constructed, historically produced aspect of identity. For an overview of Joan Scott's intervention in feminist theory, see *Gender and the Politics of History* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1999), 15-52. For a useful introduction to the debate amongst historians over the ongoing influence of Scott's work on gender see: "Revisiting 'Gender: A Useful Category of Historical Analysis,'" *American Historical Review* 113, no. 5 (2008).

³ Judith Bennett, "Feminism and History," *Gender & History* 1, no. 3 (1989): 260.

especially in newly-settled colonies. In Jamaica, slavery eroded distinctions between free men and women, while sharpening the differences between those who were free and those who were enslaved. Women derived a number of material and existential benefits from participation in Atlantic commerce, changes in English law, and especially slaveholding. The status of being legally free came to matter more than any other signifier of identity, including gender and even race. What circumstances drove these changes in Jamaica?

Jamaica: Re-Configuring the Social Hierarchy

Much of the scholarship on Jamaica focuses on the latter half of the eighteenth century when the island possessed its more familiar features: vast sugar plantations, chronic white absenteeism, and majority slave population.⁴ In an effort to understand how Jamaican society evolved to this point, I explore an earlier era of British settlement. It begins in the 1660s after England captured Jamaica from Spain in 1655 as part of Oliver Cromwell's "Western Design." It ends in the 1760s after Tacky's Revolt, and before the start of the American Revolution. During this critical period, colonists achieved economic ascendancy and made a significant and definitive investment in the African

⁴ See, for example: Lowell Ragatz, *The Fall of the Planter Class in the British Caribbean, 1763-1833: A Study In Social and Economic History* (London: Octagon Books, 1963); Richard Sheridan, *Sugar And Slavery: An Economic History Of The British West Indies* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1974); Sidney Mintz, *Sweetness and Power: The Place of Sugar in Modern History* (New York: Penguin Books, 1985); Gad Heuman, *Between Black and White: Race, Politics, and the Free Coloreds in Jamaica, 1792-1865* (Santa Barbara: Praeger, 1981); Diana Paton, *No Bond but the Law: Punishment, Race, and Gender in Jamaican State Formation, 1780-1870* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2004); Burnard, *Mastery, Tyranny, and Desire*; Barry Higman, *Plantation Jamaica, 1750-1850: Capital and Control in a Colonial Economy* (Kingston: University of the West Indies Press, 2005); Vincent Brown, *Reaper's Garden*; Christer Petley, *Slaveholders in Jamaica: Colonial Society and Culture During the Era of Abolition* (London: Pickering & Chatto Ltd., 2009).

slave trade.⁵ Jamaica's origin as a European colony was humble. At the time of British conquest, this sparsely populated and marginal outpost of the Spanish Empire served as a consolation prize for Cromwellian soldiers who failed to capture Hispaniola. By the middle of the eighteenth century, however, the island had become the single most profitable colony in the British Empire.⁶ In this relatively short time-period, free people earned unprecedented wealth. The average worth of a free white person in the British West Indies was £1,042 sterling, in contrast with the £42 average for a similar person in England or New England.⁷

But wealth came at a cost, what Vincent Brown identifies as the “catastrophic effects of a successful imperial economy.”⁸ Colonists' investment in chattel slavery was the primary reason for their phenomenal material gain. At the end of the seventeenth century, just decades after England's capture of the island, the need for labor and the high mortality rate of indentured servants drove the demand for African slaves, as it had in places like Virginia and Barbados.⁹ England's growing involvement in the slave trade through the Royal African Company aimed to both solve and profit from this colonial quandary. In 1673, a roughly equal number of enslaved and free people comprised the colony's 15,536 inhabitants. At the end of the seventeenth century, even before the Royal African Company lost its monopoly over the slave trade, the island's population of

⁵ Recent work on the early and experimental phase of European colonialism in America has shaped my approach towards chronology. See: Alison Games, *The Web of Empire: English Cosmopolitans in an Age of Expansion, 1560-1660* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2009); Karen Kupperman, *The Jamestown Project* (New York: Belknap Press, 2009); Shannon Dawdy, *Building the Devil's Empire: French Colonial New Orleans* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2009).

⁶ From 1740 to 1776 the total number of plantations increased 45 percent and the colony's exports rose from £650,000 to £2.4 million per annum. Richard Dunn, *Sugar and Slaves; The Rise of the Planter Class in the English West Indies, 1624-1713* (New York: Norton, 1973), 207.

⁷ Brown, *Reaper's Garden*, 16.

⁸ *Ibid.*, 258-259.

⁹ See for instance: Hilary Beckles, *White Servitude and Black Slavery in Barbados*; Edmund S. Morgan, *American Slavery, American Freedom: The Ordeal of Colonial Virginia*, 1st ed. (New York: Norton, 1975); Dunn, *Sugar and Slaves*.

enslaved Africans had soared. The demise of the Royal African Company's monopoly charter in 1713 led to a further increase in the slave trade, by at least sixty percent. Jamaica became one of the primary recipients of larger slave populations.¹⁰ By 1752, the 106,592 enslaved people vastly outnumbered the 10,000 free whites and 3,408 free people of color.¹¹ Early in the eighteenth century, a large slave majority already defined the colony's demographic, economic, and social character. However, our understanding of how colonists so readily became slave owners on an unprecedented scale remains murky, or at least partial. The actions of ordinary women and families provide insight into this process, for they helped to promote the rapid growth of the slave population.

Free women lived in a precarious colonial world of their own making. In a matter of decades, women's participation in slaveholding helped to make the free population a vulnerable minority: one that needed to be perpetually on guard against the revolts and uprisings of a vast and frequently hostile slave majority. The minority was further weakened by notorious mortality rates, as they died in large numbers from a host of diseases.¹² The specter of death, like slave revolt, strongly influenced the character of free society.¹³ Jamaica's situation at the heart of the Caribbean in close proximity to Spanish and French territories also raised the threat of invasion and rule by European adversaries.¹⁴ All of these factors influenced colonists' lives. The absence of powerful civic and religious institutions put even greater pressure on free families to help maintain social stability. Facing chronic death, they prioritized the preservation of family wealth, a

¹⁰ William Pettigrew, "Free to Enslave: Politics and the Escalation of Britain's Transatlantic Slave Trade, 1688-1714," *WMQ* 64, no. 1 (2007): 33.

¹¹ Burnard, *Planters, Merchants, and Slaves*, 230.

¹² Burnard, "'The Countrie Continues Sicklie': White Mortality in Jamaica, 1655-1780," *Social History of Medicine*, Volume 12, Issue 1 (1999): 48-52.

¹³ Vincent Brown explores this subject in *Reaper's Garden*.

¹⁴ See Brathwaite, *Development of Creole Society in Jamaica*.

large portion of which consisted in slaves, over successive generations. By the early eighteenth century, colonial society was increasingly focused on controlling the slave majority and upholding free people's property rights. As people's aspirations and values changed, controlling women and maintaining customary gender roles fell by the wayside.

In addition to high local mortality rates, colonial families suffered from an expanding British Empire. An increasingly global marketplace and nearly incessant warfare between European powers after 1688 resulted in a chronic absence or loss of men.¹⁵ Such changes drove English-speaking families to pursue re-location opportunities in burgeoning seaports, or else migrate to places like Jamaica. The dislocation of people from traditional communities further upended gender arrangements within families.¹⁶ In Jamaica, women became part of a rapidly changing social landscape where loss, gain, and uncertainty mingled together. A woman in Kingston might lose her husband to a shipwreck or naval battle, for example, but the money she earned—as well as the legal status she gained—as a widowed tavern keeper serving food and drink to seamen, soldiers, and merchants could be considerable. By either accident or choice, a large majority of the free women in Jamaica were either widows or spinsters.¹⁷ They could transact business as men did: drawing on or extending credit; signing contracts and authoring wills; managing offices, shops, and plantations; and bequeathing property as

¹⁵ Felicity Nussbaum refers to the period of 1720-1750 in London as “waste of life” because of high burial rates and high infant mortality rates and the “pauperization of women.” *Torrid Zones: Maternity, Sexuality, and Empire in Eighteenth-Century English Narratives* (Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1996), 26.

¹⁶ See Margaret Hunt's discussion of the effect of imperial expansion on women: *The Middling Sort: Commerce, Gender, and the Family in England, 1680-1780* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1996), 30-31.

¹⁷ Burnard calculates that the average marriage in the parish of St. Andrew lasted between six to eight years. Women tended to marry earlier than men and were more likely to survive their husbands. “A Failed Settler Society: Marriage and Demographic Failure in Early Jamaica,” *Journal of Social History* 28, no. 1 (Fall 1994): 67.

they chose. In families headed by such women, male authority was an ideal to aspire to rather than a lived reality.

Whether acting as household heads, participating in local and Atlantic markets, or bearing children out of wedlock, free single women of all races acted autonomously in Jamaica. Their investment in slavery provided them with new forms of labor and capital, enabling them to survive outside the confines of the patriarchal household. Married women also attained a new degree of independence. Traditionally, English wives were handicapped by the common law of coverture, which prevented them from signing legal contracts or engaging in credit and debt transactions under their own name.¹⁸ However, during the eighteenth century, colonists showed a growing preference for equity law, which mitigated the restrictions coverture placed on wives by establishing trusts and devising marriage settlements to protect women's property within marriage. This "property" typically consisted of enslaved people, who were defined as personal property or chattel in Jamaica.

Elsewhere in the empire, laws and institutions were devised to control unmarried women, thereby upholding patriarchal order.¹⁹ Anglo-America's growing investment in chattel slavery also reshaped these measures to enforce racial as well as gender hierarchies. Antigua passed a law in 1644, for example, imposing a fine on free white colonists who had sexual relations with blacks and extending the term of servitude for

¹⁸ As an anonymous author of a text published in 1777 explained, "the very being or legal existence of a woman is suspended; or at least it is incorporated and consolidated into that of the husband...she is therefore called in our law a *feme-covert*." Quote from Joanne Bailey, "Favoured or Oppressed? Married Women, Property and 'Coverture' In England," *Continuity and Change* 17, no. 3 (2002): 351.

¹⁹ In England, houses of correction were designed to discipline crimes associated with single women: prostitution, petty larceny, living out of service, and bastard bearing. Houses of correction that targeted women were never established in Jamaica. Amy Froide, *Never Married: Singlewomen in Early Modern England* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2007), 38; 40-41.

indentured servants who did so.²⁰ Later in the eighteenth century, North Carolina established laws regulating relations between Indians, blacks, and whites, targeting white women whose sexual activities crossed racial boundaries.²¹ But, in Jamaica, resources were invested in controlling enslaved people, rather than in policing sexual activity. In their aggressive pursuit of profit, free people there adopted openly exploitative labor practices stripped of service's traditional meaning defined by reciprocity and mutual obligation. Jamaica's large slave population made the threat of revolt an omnipresent feature of life. Officials passed punitive laws sharply distinguishing the limited rights of indentured servants from the utter lack of rights held by slaves. Any act of insubordination or disobedience by a slave provoked brutal and often life-threatening punishment. For instance, an enslaved person who struck someone could be "severely whipped" for the first offence, have his or her "nose slit" and "face burnt" for the second offence, and killed for a third offence.²² The severity of the laws policing slaves and the legal right of slave owners to act with unlimited power toward them signaled the colony's most overt departure from British law.

Jamaican colonists' treatment of free women and sexuality also signified divergence. From the courtroom to the church, both local officials and ordinary men displayed little interest in regulating sexuality and upholding patriarchal ideology.²³ Women who engaged in prostitution, had sexual relations outside of marriage, or bore

²⁰ Barbara Bush, "White 'Ladies,' Coloured 'Favourites' and Black 'Wenches,' Some Considerations on Sex, Race and Class Factors in Social Relations in White Creole Society in the British Caribbean," *Slavery & Abolition* 2, no. 3 (1981): 248.

²¹ Kirsten Fischer explores this topic in her book: *Suspect Relations: Sex, Race, and Resistance in Colonial North Carolina* (Ithaca, Cornell University Press, 2002).

²² Abstract of Jamaican laws taken from: Charles Leslie, *A New History of Jamaica* (J. Hodges: London, 1740), 218.

²³ Sarah Yeh makes this point in her article: "A Sink of All Filthiness": Gender, Family, and Identity in the British Atlantic, 1688-1763," *The Historian* 68, no. 1 (2006): p. 68.

illegitimate children were not punished in Jamaica as they were in Britain or on mainland North America. Colonial officials also diverged from their counterparts in Antigua, Virginia, and North Carolina in their decision to forgo the establishment of anti-miscegenation laws.²⁴ Consequently, white men were free to openly pursue and coerce free and enslaved women of African descent into sexual relationships.²⁵ Certain evidence suggests that white women also pursued sexual and romantic partnerships with free and enslaved black men. The island's lax attitude toward nonmarital sex, and the absence of laws prohibiting interracial relationships, partially explains how people of color made up one-quarter of the free population by the mid-eighteenth century.²⁶ Individuals, not the Crown or the colonial government, held the right to free slaves and to make bequests to whomever they chose to. Men and women regularly manumitted slaves and provided generously for them, further augmenting the number of free people of African descent.

Over the course of the eighteenth century, race acquired new meaning.²⁷ Humoral medical beliefs, which defined skin color or “complexion” as a mutable and external characteristic, persisted. Likewise, the meaning of “race” could be variable, denoting a person's family ancestry, country of birth, or ethnicity.²⁸ However, narrower constructions of race as embodied, innate, and inheritable—which associated whiteness with superior morality, intelligence, and civility—were outstripping these older, more

²⁴ See Brooke Newman, “Gender, Sexuality and the Formation of Racial identities in the Eighteenth century Anglo-Caribbean World,” *Gender & History* 22, no. 3 (2010): 585-602.

²⁵ See Christer Petley, “‘Legitimacy’ and Social Boundaries: Free People of Colour and the Social Order in Jamaican Slave Society,” *Social History* 30, no. 4 (2005): 481-498.

²⁶ Of the 13,408 free people who lived in Jamaica in 1752, 3,408 were identified as having African descent. Population numbers from Burnard, *Planters, Merchants, and Slaves*, 230.

²⁷ Fischer dates the emergence of notions of racial difference in colonial North Carolina to the mid-eighteenth century. *Suspect Relations*, 132.

²⁸ For a discussion of the meaning of ethnicity in early modern Britain see: Colin Kidd, *British Identities Before Nationalism: Ethnicity and Nationhood in the Atlantic World, 1600-1800* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2006); Linda Colley, *Britons: Forging the Nation 1707-1837, Second Edition* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2005).

varied meanings. This change coincided with Britain's expanding imperial power and its investment in chattel slavery. Freedom was increasingly intertwined with whiteness and enslavement with blackness.

In Jamaica, the slave majority population played a profound role in shaping local understandings of race. During the first decades of the eighteenth century, official documents and personal records reveal the widespread usage of the racial/ethnic categories "negro," "white," "mulatto," and "Indian." Only non-whites could be enslaved, and restrictive measures were enacted to thwart the rights of free people of color, who made up one quarter of the island's free population by 1750.²⁹ The 1760 slave uprising called "Tacky's Revolt" heightened fears about possible collusion between free and unfree people of African descent, resulting in further race-based regulation.³⁰

Yet, the meaning of race and its relationship to slavery was also more complicated. While race-based laws served as the *de jure* means of discriminating against people with African ancestry, laws did not necessarily translate into informal, *de facto* racial segregation. In their commercial activities and personal relationships, free people of European and African descent regularly crossed racial boundaries. The practices of everyday life manifested a more nebulous and porous interpretation of race. Nor did racial categories based on ancestry and complexion map neatly onto a binary of free/enslaved. Free people of African descent had a vested interest in maintaining slaveholding. Indeed, the ability of all free white and black women to own slaves provided legal, financial, and social autonomy. These dynamics suggest a more

²⁹ Of the 13,408 free people who lived in Jamaica in 1752, 3,408 were identified as having African descent. Numbers taken from Burnard, *Planters, Merchants, and Slaves*, 230.

³⁰ Laws were passed restricting the size of bequests to free people of color, requiring them to register, and to wear badges. Newman, "Gender, Sexuality and the Formation of Racial identities in the Eighteenth century Anglo-Caribbean World," 589-590.

ambiguously gendered and racialized social hierarchy, one in which the status of being free was of utmost importance.

Furthermore, free people of color regularly and often successfully contested the efforts of local officials to deploy race-based restrictions. Some petitioned imperial officials and the Crown to claim the same legal rights as white people.³¹ Linda Sturtz's study of the "socially and racially liminal space" occupied by Mary Rose, a free woman of color, provides one example of the mercurial meanings assigned to race in mid-eighteenth century Jamaica. While certain official documents categorized Rose as "mulatto," she successfully petitioned the island Assembly to assume the rights of a free person born to English parents.³² Whether by intention or accident, the lineage of free people like Mary Rose could be "whitened" over successive generations. The archives are a frustrating embodiment of these elisions, omissions, and silences as much as they are a reflection of the concerted effort of local and imperial officials to identify and exert power based on emerging notions of racial difference. In this study I will identify whether a person had European or African ancestry whenever possible, and highlight how racial identity influenced socioeconomic position, yet I remain cognizant of and interested in how people in the past actively or inadvertently avoided racial categorization.

³¹ See Newman's discussion of the unstable, mutable nature of whiteness in Jamaica: "Gender, Sexuality and the Formation of Racial identities in the Eighteenth century Anglo-Caribbean World," 587-588.

³² Linda Sturtz, "Mary Rose: 'White' African Jamaican Woman? Race and Gender in Eighteenth-Century Jamaica," eds. Judith Byfield, La Ray Denzer, and Anthea Morrison, *Gendering the African Diaspora: Women, Culture, and Historical Change in the Caribbean and Nigerian Hinterland* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2010), 60-61.

Historiographic Contribution

My dissertation aims to show that women were central agents in the rise of Atlantic slavery and a globalizing marketplace. Conventionally, scholars have identified a small group of white male merchants and planters as the principal agents who developed a rampantly exploitative, yet highly profitable, form of colonialism. The classic narrative of the British Empire's origins oscillates between the entrepreneurial spirit of merchants who instituted global trade and the brutality of patriarchal slave owners.³³ Recently, however, historians have begun to explore the roles that women played in constructing the trade networks that undergirded European projects of empire during the early modern period.³⁴ While European law and custom aimed to uphold a patriarchal social hierarchy by limiting women's economic and legal agency on both sides of the Atlantic, such efforts reflected ideals rather than reality for many.³⁵ Women were simultaneously

³³ For scholarship on male merchants, see: Kenneth Morgan, *Bristol and the Atlantic Trade in the Eighteenth Century* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2004); David Hancock, *Citizens of the World: London Merchants and the Integration of the British Atlantic Community, 1735-1785* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1997); Robert Brenner, *Merchants and Revolution: Commercial Change, Political Conflict, and London's Overseas Traders, 1550-1653* (Brooklyn: Verso, 2003); Perry Gauci, *Emporium of the World: the Merchants of London 1660-1800* (New York: Continuum, 2007). A shortlist of the extensive scholarship on male slave owners in Atlantic world includes: Morgan, *American Slavery, American Freedom*; Dunn, *Sugar and Slaves*; Philip Morgan, *Slave Counterpoint: Black Culture in the Eighteenth-Century Chesapeake & Lowcountry* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1998); Trevor Burnard, *Mastery, Tyranny, and Desire*; Christer Petley, *Slaveholders in Jamaica*.

³⁴ See Douglas Catterall and Jodi Campbell, eds., *Women in Port: Gendering Communities, Economies, and Social Networks in Atlantic Port Cities, 1500-1800* (Boston: Brill, 2011).

³⁵ Though only a partial list, notable works on women, gender, or sexuality in early America include: Kathleen Brown, *Good Wives, Nasty Wenches, and Anxious Patriarchs: Gender, Race, and Power in Colonial Virginia* (Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina Press, 1996); Clare Lyons, *Sex among the Rabble: An Intimate History of Gender and Power in the Age of Revolution, Philadelphia, 1730-1830* (Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina Press, 2006); Kirsten Fischer, *Suspect Relations*; Linda Sturtz, *Within Her Power: Propertied Women in Colonial Virginia* (New York: Routledge, 2002); Jennifer Spear, *Race, Sex, and Social Order in Early New Orleans* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2009). A shortlist of work on similar topics in early modern Britain includes: Amy Froide, *Never Married*; Amanda Vickery, *Behind Closed Doors: At Home in Georgian England* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2010); Laura Gowing, *Domestic Dangers: Women, Words, and Sex in Early Modern London* (New York: Oxford, 1996).

constrained by and negotiated prescriptive gender roles.³⁶ Scholarship on gender, sexuality, and colonialism has also proven a fruitful arena for considering how white women simultaneously embodied and enforced European ideals, and exerted cultural and symbolic power in colonial regimes.³⁷

In spite of this growing body of work on gender, sexuality, race, and colonialism, our understanding of women as active propagators of slavery and empire remains limited.³⁸ Over twenty years ago, Hilary Beckles observed that “the traditional conception of the slave owner as male remains unchallenged, and the socio-economic limits of patriarchy not identified.”³⁹ Recently, Cecily Jones echoed Beckles’s critique, noting that white women are “conceptualized as insignificant subjects within the socio-economic processes of the colonial societies they inhabited, and remain shadowy figures on the margins of Caribbean slave historiographies.”⁴⁰ Poor and middle-class white women, in particular, have been neglected in this scholarship.⁴¹ Feminist scholars who

³⁶ Specifically: Froide, *Never Married*; Vickery, *Behind Closed Doors*; Dena Goodman, *Becoming a Woman in the Age of Letters* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2009); Karen Wulf, *Not All Wives: Women of Colonial Philadelphia* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2005); Ellen Hartigan-O’Connor, *The Ties that Buy: Women and Commerce in Revolutionary America* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2009).

³⁷ Works include: Kathleen Wilson, *The Island Race: Englishness, Empire and Gender in the Eighteenth Century* (New York: Routledge, 2002); Nussbaum, *Torrid Zones*; Roxann Wheeler, *The Complexion of Race: Categories of Difference in Eighteenth-Century British Culture* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2000); Kim Hall, *Things of Darkness: Economies of Race and Gender in Early Modern England* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1995).

³⁸ Exceptions include: Cecily Jones, *Engendering Whiteness: White Women and Colonialism in Barbados and North Carolina, 1627–1865* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2007); Natalie Zacek, “Searching for the Invisible Woman: The Evolution of White Women’s Experience in Britain’s West Indian Colonies,” *History Compass* 7, no. 1 (2009): 329–341; Linda Sturtz, “The ‘Dimduke’ and the Duchess of Chandos: Gender and Power in Jamaican Plantation Management—A Case Study or, A Different Story of ‘A Man [and his wife] from a Place Called Hope,” *Revista/Review Interamericana* 29 (1999); Barbara Bush, “White ‘Ladies,’ Coloured ‘Favourites’ and Black ‘Wenches’: pp. 245–262.

³⁹ Hilary McD. Beckles, “White Women and Slavery in the Caribbean,” *History Workshop* 36, no. 1 (1993): pp. 66; 68.

⁴⁰ Cecily Jones, “Contesting the Boundaries of Gender, Race and Sexuality in Barbadian Plantation Society,” *Women’s History Review* 12, no. 2 (2003): 204.

⁴¹ See Natalie Zacek, “Between Lady and Slave: White Working Women in the Eighteenth-Century Leeward Islands,” in *Women in Port*, 150; *ibid.*, “Searching for the Invisible Woman,” 330.

work on the Anglo-Caribbean have focused on enslaved women, revealing how slavery and racism gendered and sexualized women of African descent in distinctive, profoundly exploitative ways.⁴² Newer work investigates the ambiguous positions held by free women of color in societies increasingly characterized by racial caste systems.⁴³ A wider geographic and chronological net must be cast to find a substantial investigation of the nature of authority held by free women in a slaveholding society. Thavolia Glymph's recent work on Antebellum America, for instance, has challenged the notion that all women were equally subordinated by white men's patriarchal power. She notes that white women's agency in slavery has been "profoundly underestimated."⁴⁴ The marginality of free white women in studies of slavery in the early modern Anglo-Atlantic world perpetuates the assumption that power relations between white men, women, and children, as well as free and enslaved people, were structured by patriarchal and paternalistic gender ideologies alone.⁴⁵ Consequently, free women of all races are implicitly absolved of responsibility for the destruction wrought by colonialism and slavery.

In this study, I build on the work of those scholars who have pioneered the study of women, gender, race, and sexuality in the early modern Atlantic World. I also examine women's activities in relation to changing notions of femininity, cultural expectations,

⁴² Jennifer Morgan, *Laboring Women: Reproduction and Gender in New World Slavery* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2004); Verene Shepherd, ed., *Women in Caribbean History: The British-Colonised Territories* (Kingston: Ian Randle, 1999); Barbara Bush, *Slave Women in Caribbean Society: 1650-1838* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1990); Lucille Mathurin Mair, *A Historical Study of Women in Jamaica from 1655 to 1844* (Kingston: University of the West Indies Press, 2006).

⁴³ For the British Caribbean see: Linda Sturtz, "Mary Rose," pp. 59-87; Marisa Fuentes, "Power and Historical Figuring: Rachel Pringle Polgreen's Troubled Archive," *Gender & History* 22, no. 3 (2010): pp. 564-584.

⁴⁴ Thavolia Glymph, *Out of the House of Bondage: The Transformation of the Plantation Household* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2008), 25-31.

⁴⁵ Burnard contends that unequal gender ratios strongly influenced the patriarchal social character of the colony. "A Failed Settler Society": 63-82.

and legal or economic restrictions. My aim is to center women in the histories of Atlantic slavery and colonialism, from which they have been largely absent. By amending the absences, omissions, and oblique references to women in Jamaica, this project addresses the double erasure of both the women and the slaves they owned from the conjoined histories of empire and slavery. Women's activities render visible a cadre of enslaved people who have remained hidden in the archives: a consequence of the enduring assumption that women were marginal to slavery. Slaves' lives were shaped by the diverse personalities and demands of individual owners, rather than a set of gender conventions ordering free society. They were embedded in a profoundly unequal and exploitative social world that was constituted through the daily exercise of coercive brutality committed by men and women alike.

But a focus on women alone does not reveal the construction and contestation of gender difference or the power signified by gender. Women's lives were intimately intertwined and inseparable from men's in Jamaica. Thus, I study women's relationships with husbands, fathers, brothers, and male business partners. While I highlight instances when colonists referred to themselves as gendered subjects, I am equally intrigued by the occasions when people either elided or ignored gendered social and cultural norms.⁴⁶ In business correspondence, for instance, women merchants focused on practical matters; their agents in London responded in kind, generally eschewing gendered notions of feminine deference.

By locating free women and men within the family household, I seek to address the concern that Atlantic historiography has "paid little attention to the ways in which

⁴⁶ In using this term I refer to Judith Butler's theory of gender as performative, or always in the process of being constructed through actions and words. *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity* (New York: Routledge, 2006).

families, households, and kin were critically important” in shaping the Atlantic world.⁴⁷ During the early modern period, the household, not the abstract individual, was conceived of as the primary building block of society.⁴⁸ Prescriptive social norms dictated that men could not achieve full manhood until they married and governed households. Similarly, women entered into adulthood by marrying and bearing children.⁴⁹ In Jamaica, the enactment of power based on gender, age, status, or race occurred within the family household. Free families, in turn, forged the social, economic, and political relations that laid the groundwork for colonial society. Viewing slave ownership as a practice learned within the family household helps to explain how women became so involved in slavery. Slave-ownership was of vital importance to families, rather than the sole concern of white men acting in isolation. Husbands and wives, parents and children, and siblings were all deeply invested in protecting and propagating slavery. They did so by permanently disrupting and altering the familial arrangements of hundreds of thousands of Africans.

From home to shop to plantation, from cradle to grave, from island to metropole, women’s widespread and intensive involvement in slavery complicates the notion that patriarchal or paternalistic ideologies alone ordered the colonial household and informed the master-slave relationship. Virginia planters like William Byrd II, for example, cast himself as a “patriarch” who ruled his “bond-men and bond-women, thereby masking the

⁴⁷ Julie Hardwick, Sarah Pearsall, and Karin Wulf, “Introduction: Centering Families in Atlantic History,” *WMQ* 70, no. 2 (2013): 206.

⁴⁸ Alexandra Shepard writes that the household was “the primary structural locus of male supremacy in terms of fatherly rule, and the marital relations at its core were the justification for men’s subordination of women.” *Meanings of Manhood in Early Modern England* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2003), 70.

⁴⁹ Wulf, *Not All Wives*, 88-89.

novelty of the master-slave relationship in the guise of medieval fealty.”⁵⁰ But women who wielded this novel power—novel in its absoluteness—did not fit into Byrd’s model of benevolent paternalism. Free women did not merely step into male roles, or perform masculinity as slave owners. The authority they commanded over enslaved people differed significantly from the power that husbands commanded over wives, fathers over children, and masters or mistresses over servants. It was an authority constituted by free women’s absolute power over slaves: the power to use any means necessary, including coercion, violence, and torture to uphold their authority. Illuminating women’s economic, legal, and social practices helps to clarify the contours of the slaveholding societies that emerged throughout the early modern Atlantic world. These societies were premised upon a new definition of individual liberty, in which liberty was equated with the right to hold human beings as personal property. In places like Jamaica, the individual, irrespective of gender, was invested with unmitigated power over this new, distinctive form of property.

Chapter Outline

Chapter One, “The New Model Colony” studies both imperial policies and colonists’ lived practices during the first sixty years of British rule, revealing the significance of women, gender, marital status, and sexuality to the formation of colonial society. Rather than seeing Jamaica as a “failed settler society” in contrast with North America, imperial agents in London and local governors alike clung to the notion that the patriarchal household ensured social stability. The rapid expansion of slavery at the end

⁵⁰ William Byrd represented himself as an independent patriarch whose independence was constructed by his presumed mastery over his dependents. Kenneth Lockridge, *The Diary, and Life, of William Byrd II of Virginia, 1674-1744* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1987), 123.

of the seventeenth century only intensified imperial strategists' belief in the importance of women, whose reproductive capacities would be harnessed to increase the free population, providing much-needed bodies to defend the island against slave uprisings and attacks by European enemies. During the second half of the seventeenth century, the plan to attract women to the island worked. Women formed a highly visible and important segment of the free population, especially in Port Royal—the island's main seaport. However, colonists diverged from the imperial plan to establish social order through the patriarchal household. Instead, the local devotion to commerce, wealth, and—increasingly—the African slave trade fostered more egalitarian gender dynamics and a liberal sexual culture.

Chapter Two, “The ‘Libertine’ Island,” explores the development of the colony's sexual culture during the first half of the eighteenth century. The weakness of political and religious institutions, high mortality rates, a growing slave population, and a profit-oriented culture allowed for a more lenient approach toward sexuality. No laws were established to punish colonists who pursued nonmarital relations or bore children out of wedlock. Free white women, in particular, benefited from a relaxation of customary moral controls and enjoyed greater sexual autonomy. Women of European and African descent bore children out of wedlock at high rates, facing few repercussions for doing so. While the lack of oversight also sanctioned the widespread sexual exploitation of enslaved people, some free/enslaved couples developed meaningful relationships in the absence of anti-miscegenation laws. As a result, the population of free people of African descent continued to grow during this time, and colonial families frequently included legitimate and illegitimate children who were free and enslaved.

Chapter Three, “Till Death Do Us Part,” examines how the island’s changing legal culture further bolstered free women’s independence, making them significant investors in slavery. During the first half of the eighteenth century colonists increasingly favored newer equity procedures over common law traditions to structure marriage and inheritance. Free people established trusts and annuities and used marriage contracts to shore up women’s property rights within marriage. These actions slowly eroded the strictures of coverture. Equity also reshaped inheritance practices. Free people preferred to devise estates more equitably than the common law customs of dower, primogeniture, and entail allowed for. As a result, wives and daughters received more substantial legacies and gained greater authority over family estates. The legal definition of enslaved people as personal property, rather than real estate, further augmented women’s financial, legal, and social autonomy. By the early eighteenth century it was customary to give slaves to free women, providing them with valuable assets and laborers. Equity offered a means of protecting women’s rights to their newfound wealth both within and outside of marriage.

Chapter Four, “Womanly Masters,” examines free women’s engagement in every aspect of slavery, as they helped to make Jamaica the largest slaveholding colony in the Anglo-Atlantic world. In addition to inheriting slaves, women of European and African descent on every level of society bought, sold, managed, punished, and freed slaves. This chapter adds a new dimension to the historiography of Atlantic slavery, which focuses on white men as the primary agents driving the expansion of chattel slavery in America. During the first half of the eighteenth century, slaveholding was not defined by patriarchal or paternalistic ideologies. Instead, all free members, regardless of gender,

race, or class, participated in defining and propagating slavery as the island's primary labor system.

Chapter Five, "Pursuing Her Profits," contends that women's dependence upon slavery, as a source of wealth and labor, fit hand-in-glove with an increased participation in the Atlantic marketplace. This chapter studies the economic activities of free women from all walks of colonial life, from wealthy merchants who traversed national boundaries and invested in a nascent stock market to local tavern keepers and seamstresses. Focusing on free women's commercial activities reveals the existence of a marketplace in Jamaica that was far more diverse than has been typically understood. Free women manifested a strong sense of themselves as economic agents, as did the men with whom they did business. They participated in an early modern Atlantic economy, where the pursuit of profits overrode lingering constraints on women's participation in commerce.

The final chapter, "To Be My Own Mistress," examines the lives of three women planters—Mary Elbridge, Rebecca Woolnough and Anna Elletson—to reveal how they, and many others, directly managed every aspect of the plantation business, from agriculture and exportation of colonial produce to controlling enslaved laborers. Starting with Mary Elbridge—who turned her family's sugar plantation into a profitable enterprise beginning in the 1730s, and ending in the 1770s when Anna Elletson oversaw hundreds of slaves and a large sugar estate from abroad—this chapter demonstrates how free women helped to make Jamaica the most productive plantation economy in British America. They played an active role in establishing the agricultural landscape that produced much of the island's wealth, from subsisting off smallholdings to managing

large sugar plantations. Women shouldered considerable agricultural, financial, and legal responsibilities; most significantly, they assumed enormous power over the fates of enslaved human beings. Their work as plantation managers further illustrates how colonial families modified customary gender roles, as they sought to sustain and prosper from plantation slavery. Ceding greater authority to free women, and making them stakeholders in the success of plantations, contributed to the colony's dramatic rise in Britain's eighteenth-century empire.

Overview of Sources

This dissertation draws upon a range of diverse materials held in Jamaica, England, Scotland, and the United States. Their scattering on both sides of the Atlantic mirrors the movement of people between the colony and the metropole, or vice versa, during the early modern period. The death of a relative, for example, would frequently initiate a family's travelling to Britain or Jamaica to assume responsibility for an estate. Yet, the disparate locations of historical artifacts studied here also manifest the lingering consequences of imperialism. Knowledge, like the sugar and rum produced in Jamaica, flowed to the metropole. The wealth people derived from colonial ventures and slaveholding facilitated their relocation to Britain, and provided them with the material resources to preserve historical records for posterity. Official documents generated by a growing empire, such as the correspondence between colonial politicians and the Board of Trade, followed a similar trajectory, finding a permanent home at the National Archives in Kew. The difference in resources possessed by Jamaican and British archives

articulates the broader disparities wrought by more than three hundred years of colonial rule.

“To Be My Own Mistress” integrates the methodological approaches of cultural and social history, balancing empirically driven studies of behavior patterns with critical textual readings. Throughout, I read manuscript and print sources, from wills and court records to government papers and published literature, as discursive texts to explore how gender, race, sexuality, and slavery took on new, often contested cultural and social meanings in Jamaica. From authoring wills to baptizing children and purchasing slaves, these materials yield evidence of people’s social practices, or “lived practices.” When studied in aggregate, social practices disclose broader historical patterns, such as the increase in illegitimate births or the rise of women’s involvement in slaveholding. In turn, these patterns help to clarify how power operated in colonial society, while also disclosing the contested nature of power. The philosopher Michel de Certeau provides a useful theory for interpreting the dynamic between social practice and power. Certeau argues that disempowered people co-opt the techniques and practices of the powerful and redefine these techniques for their own purposes.⁵¹ In Jamaica, free women and slaves were both disempowered: women in relation to men, slaves in relation to free people. They too co-opted the practices of the powerful (white men) such as slaveholding, for their own purposes.

⁵¹ Certeau characterizes the tactics of the ‘weak’ as “intellectual creativity as persistent as it is subtle, tireless, ready for every opportunity.” Vincent Brown employs this approach when he writes: “a history of slavery is best understood by accounting for the social awareness, strategies, and tactical maneuvers of all contending parties, including the illiterate, the weak, and the nonwhite.” *The Practice of Everyday Life* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2002), 38; Brown, *Reaper’s Garden*, 9.

Government Records

Government papers capture the interests and concerns of the colonial government's legislative branch. The colonial governors were normally English officials elected by the Crown and awarded the governorship as a lucrative political post. Locally elected officials served in Jamaica's House of Assembly, although wealthy planters dominated its ranks and frequently contested the authority of the royally appointed governors. The Lords of Trade were members of the committee that oversaw colonial matters for the Crown in Britain. Colonial governors and members of the Jamaica Assembly frequently sent correspondence to the Lords of Trade in London. This miscellany of local news, concerns, laws, and petitions provides important contextual material throughout the dissertation.

Personal correspondence

Few personal papers from early modern Jamaica have survived centuries of humidity, pests, hurricanes, and earthquakes. Women's letters are even more rare. What does exist resides in Britain. The largely unstudied correspondence that has been unearthed for this dissertation yields valuable evidence about an array of women's activities on the island. Letters also reveal how the authors sought to portray themselves in written discourse, and how they used epistolary practices to forge and maintain relationships over vast distances. On the whole, the people who wrote letters tended to possess middling or wealthy status, but even impoverished women and slaves wrote letters. During the first half of the eighteenth century, colonists' letters divulge their engagement with polite, and increasingly sentimental, discourses, as well as their participation in an Atlantic world of letters.

Probated Wills and Inventories

Inheritance issues were not the sole provinces of wealthy white men. Colonial wills capture a diverse cross-section of free society. Colonists from all walks were acutely aware that surviving into old age was unlikely. They lived in an era when for many people inheritance could provide more financial support than wage labor, and they shared a deep concern for supporting family and friends after death. The colony's severe mortality rates made protecting the transmission of wealth extremely important, especially when parents regularly died before children reached adulthood and legatees might be spread across the Atlantic. Overall, wills disclose colonists' varied material lives, their growing investment in slaveholding, their relationships with family and friends, and their efforts to orchestrate events from beyond the grave.

In my dissertation research, I examined 1,245 wills made by male and female colonists between 1661 and 1770 recorded at the Island Secretary's Office in Spanish Town, the record keeping branch of the colonial government. Men left the majority of colonial wills. The demographic disparity between the sexes partially accounts for this, but, more importantly, it reflects the restriction coverture placed on married women who could not legally make wills in their own names. However, many women took measures to circumvent this rule. Furthermore, women were anything but absent in men's wills. As a result, I sampled 504 wills left by men who provided substantial legacies for female relatives in one-year sequences for every decade between 1661 and 1770. Three quarters (374) of the 504 wills were chosen because husbands or widowers made them. Women's wills are of even greater importance to this project: I studied all 741 women's wills

recorded between 1661 and 1757.⁵² Though early modern people borrowed from the same body of legal language, they did not adhere to a standard format in composing wills. Colonists used expressions such as “all of my personal and real estate” without expanding upon the details of what their estates consisted of, for example. Early modern wills reveal cumulative patterns, and the percentages I have generated using them are estimates rather than exact numbers.

Whereas a will illuminates how a deceased person desired his/her material assets to be handled, a probated inventory provides a detailed list of what the person legally owned, including slaves but excluding real estate. It offers a “snapshot” of an estate after all the debts have been settled.⁵³ Probates were filed at the Island Secretary’s Office within one year of a person’s death. In this study, I used basic information from all 1,188 inventories of women’s estates proved between 1674 and 1784 to capture broad patterns of property ownership, especially in slaves.⁵⁴ Inventories afford an opportunity to consider the symbolic, as well as the monetary value of women’s material lives. Thus, I analyzed the 179 women’s inventories created between 1674 and 1770 in much greater detail to develop a more refined sense of what they wore, how they furnished their homes, and even how they ate, deepening the collective portrait of their lives.

Parish registers

While the Island Secretary’s Office handled records relating to property ownership, parish churchwardens recorded births, marriages, and deaths in the colony, continuing the longstanding tradition of recording life events in Britain. To study

⁵² Time constraints precluded a study of the wills created by women between 1758 and 1770.

⁵³ Amy Erickson, *Women and Property In Early Modern England* (New York: Routledge, 1995), 34.

⁵⁴ The numbers were taken from a database of inventories created by Trevor Burnard who granted the author permission to use his data. Jamaica Inventories, 1674-1784, JA.

illegitimacy, I recorded all of the baptisms in the following parishes for the following years:

Kingston	St. Andrew	St. Catherine	St. Thomas	St. Elizabeth	Westmoreland
1722-1729	1668-1675	1669-1695	1713-1720	1707-1709	1739-1743
1740-1741	1680-1681	1704-1707	1720-1726	1718-1719	1750-1751
1750-1751	1690-1691	1714-1717	1730-1733	1731-1761	1760
1760-1761	1700	1724-1725	1738-1740		
	1702	1734-1738	1749-1751		
	1710-1711	1741	1757-1761		
	1720-1721	1748-1749			
	1730-1731	1754-1755			
	1740-1741	1760			
	1750-1751				
	1760-1761				
	1763				

Because parish registers were kept irregularly, it was difficult to devise and follow a consistent sample strategy. Furthermore, the parishes were established at varying times, resulting in far fewer records for newer parishes such as Westmoreland than for older parishes like St. Andrew.

Court Records

Free women and men used three types of courts to solve disputes over money and property. Disagreements involving real estate or considerable wealth were tried in the colony's Chancery Court. These cases tend to capture the interests of middling and elite colonists. Jamaica, like New York, Maryland, Virginia, and South Carolina established a chancery court to handle equity matters.⁵⁵ Women were most commonly involved in equity procedures such as the establishment of marriage settlements, separate estates, and

⁵⁵ Marylynn Salmon, *Women and the Law of Property in Early America* (Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina Press, 1986), 8-10.

jointures, which usually took the form of annual monetary payments called annuities.⁵⁶

The Jamaica Archives limits access to colonial court records because of their delicate condition, and I was only allowed to review chancery volumes for following years: 1676-1678; 1707-1709; 1738-1744. The island's Grand Court—or Supreme Court, as it was sometimes called—was the chief common law court of judicature that handled civil and criminal cases. It captures the financial activities of a more racially and economically diverse group of colonists. The cases generally related to debt litigation over £20 or more. The Grand Court records are equally brittle and its cases for only 1680, 1743, and 1761 have survived. It tried criminal cases for fraud, larceny, burglary, arson, forgery, carnal abuse, infanticide, obeah, manslaughter, and perjury on the island. Only one volume from the eighteenth century has survived and it is considered too fragile to be handled by researchers. Thus, I was unable to investigate criminal trial proceedings.

Literary works

Published literary works, including travel narratives and plays, comprise an important source for this study. British visitors to the island in the late seventeenth century, like John Taylor and Edward Ward, authored rich accounts of local culture, portraying Jamaica and its inhabitants as exotic and excessive. These works are important and have been much studied. “The Islanders, or Mad Orphan,” an unpublished play written by the Jamaican-born author John Kelly in 1737, is one of the earliest pieces written by a colonist to survive, and to my knowledge has not been studied before.⁵⁷ It offers unique insight into gender relations and slavery from the perspective of an island native. Another unstudied work, the anonymously authored play *The Fancy: or, A*

⁵⁶ Erickson, *Women and Property In Early Modern England*, 114-128.

⁵⁷ John Kelly, “The Islanders, or Mad Orphan,” 1737, King's 301, BL.

Voyage to London published in London in 1744, portrays the antics of a Jamaican family who relocate to Britain with their slaves. Both works, written before the degenerate West Indian became a familiar figure in British literature, reveal a more ambivalent attitude toward the colony, its inhabitants, and their dependency on slaveholding.

A Note On Currency

Unless otherwise noted, Jamaican pounds current have been converted into British pounds sterling.⁵⁸ One Jamaican current pound was on average three-quarters of the value of one British pound sterling. All conversions from early-modern values to modern 2014 values were calculated using the application on a website developed by Lawrence H. Officer and Samuel H. Williamson, Professors of Economics at University of Illinois at Chicago: “Measuring Worth.”⁵⁹ As a comparison measure, £117 in the year 2014 has the same purchasing power as one British pound in 1770. Similarly, £119 in the year 2014 has the same purchasing power as one British pound in 1661.

⁵⁸ The exchange rates are published in: John McCusker, *Money and Exchange in Europe and America, 1600-1775: A Handbook* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1992), 251-253.

⁵⁹ *Measuring Worth*, www.measuringworth.com

CHAPTER ONE

A New Model Colony: Gender, Slavery and the Settlement of Jamaica

Edmund HICKERINGILL served as a soldier in Oliver Cromwell's "Western Design": a military campaign to challenge Spanish power in the Caribbean. Largely considered to be a failure, the Western Design resulted in England's unplanned capture of Jamaica from Spain in 1655. Five years later, HICKERINGILL published *Jamaica Viewed*: one of the earliest English travel accounts of the island. While the forty-four-page pamphlet was ostensibly written to lure settlers to the newly acquired territory, HICKERINGILL also used the travel narrative to air his views on gender and authority, blaming the martial disaster on General Robert Venables's wife Elizabeth who had accompanied her husband on the campaign. The author claimed that Elizabeth used her sexual allure to wield power over the General, making him "kneel at his own Fire side" and "*lower his Top-Sail*" to her "*Petty-coat*." Controlled by a woman, Venables was "unfit" to "*head an Army*."¹ Women should be "content" as "House-Wives and keep in their Kitchings and Nurseries," "not run Salt and Rank to Campaigns, and Navy's, Debauching the Camp," he argued.² The

¹ Edmund HICKERINGILL, *Jamaica Viewed: with All the Ports, Harbours, and their several Soundings, Towns, and Settlements thereunto belonging. The Third Edition* (London: B. Bragg, 1705), 37-38.

² HICKERINGILL, *Jamaica Viewed*, A2.

author was born in 1631 and came of age during a tumultuous period, when the Civil War, the regicide, and the Protectorate had profoundly disturbed the customary ordering of English society.³ During these years, women began to assert themselves in novel ways, petitioning Parliament, acting as prophets in radical religious sects, and aiding both armies during the Civil War. Hickeringill attributed social crises to the breakdown of traditional gender roles, describing women like Elizabeth who entered into male spheres as “monsters in nature.”

The Western Design was a fiasco but not for the reason cited by Hickeringill. The Design emerged out of a scheme devised by Cromwell and his Council dedicated to seizing Hispaniola and possibly Cuba, thereby strengthening England’s power in the Caribbean and thwarting Spain’s access to bullion in America.⁴ Aggressively imperialistic, the Design signaled a shift in England’s strategy overseas from trade to conquest. In 1655, thirty-eight ships manned by 3,000 soldiers left England for the Caribbean, where an additional 5,200 men from Barbados and the Leeward Islands augmented the ranks.⁵ But the soldiers—who received poor training, lacked food and equipment, and died in droves from disease—proved to be a poor match for a well-guarded Spanish colony.⁶ While *Jamaica Viewed* incorrectly attributed the defeat to Elizabeth Venables, the pamphlet shows how perceptions of gender roles, marital status, and sexuality were inextricably linked to England’s imperial activities. In focusing so

³ David Cressy describes the period as a “time when patriarchal discipline, like other forms of authority, seemed to be crumbling.” “Lamentable, Strange, and Wonderful: Headless Monsters and the English Revolution,” eds. Laura Lunger Knoppers and Joan B. Landes, *Monstrous Bodies / Political Monstrosities* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2004), 54.

⁴ Abigail Swingen, *Competing Visions of Empire: Labor, Slavery, and the Origins of the British Atlantic Empire* (New Haven: Yale University Press, forthcoming), Chapter 2.

⁵ 5,000 men from Barbados and 1,200 more from the Leeward Islands joined the army. For more on the conquest of Jamaica see Susan Amussen, *Caribbean Exchanges: Slavery and the Transformation of English Society, 1640-1700* (Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina Press, 2007), p. 33-37.

⁶ Swingen, *Competing Visions of Empire*, Chapter 2.

much attention on a woman, the author also discloses her prominence in a military campaign, so much so that she provoked his ire. Rather than remaining at home to “keep in her kitching” or “nursery,” Elizabeth joined her husband on an imperial venture that was beyond the scope of anything England had ever attempted in America. Her presence underscores how women of European descent—wives, mothers, widows, and spinsters—actively participated in turning the island into an English colony. Why, then, are women so absent from contemporary scholarship on the settlement of Jamaica?

Underlying assumptions about gender, marriage, and sexuality—which continue to shape characterizations of early America—help explain women’s absence. Current accounts of British colonization in the early modern Atlantic world typically contrast northern and southern colonies. Unlike their northerly brethren, southern colonists developed sexual cultures that diverged sharply from British norms, especially in the subtropical Caribbean region. In Jamaica, the chronic deficiency of free women of European descent thwarted efforts to establish legitimate family households.⁷ Unequal gender ratios resulted in the creation of a decidedly masculine society defined by an ethos of “virile heterosexual libertinism.”⁸ This interpretive approach draws attention to important regional differences that distinguished the colonies from one another. While high mortality rates and slave majority populations were defining features of Jamaican society, the colony’s gender dynamics and sexual practices deserve reconsideration. Edmund HICKERINGILL’s *Jamaica Viewed* offers an important early example of women’s

⁷ Trevor Burnard contends that unequal gender ratios strongly influenced the social character of the colony. “A Failed Settler Society”: 63-82.

⁸ Ibid., “‘Rioting in goatish embraces’: Marriage and improvement in early British Jamaica,” *History of the Family* 11, no. 4 (2006): 189.

participation in British colonial projects. Rather than being absent, women of European descent were highly visible actors in the settlement of Jamaica.

This chapter studies both imperial policies and colonial practices during the first sixty years of British rule, revealing the centrality of women, gender, marital status, and sexuality in the formation of colonial society. The Crown, the Lords of Trade, and local governors all believed women would play critical roles as wives and mothers in colonial settlement. In an effort to settle a stable and growing free population on the island, imperial mandates privileged married couples and single women who moved there, rewarding them with free travel and land grants. By the end of the seventeenth century the rapid expansion of slavery had only intensified free women's importance in the minds of imperial strategists: childbearing women would increase the free population, which was essential for the colony's defense against slave uprisings and attacks by European enemies.

During the second half of the seventeenth century, the plan to attract women to Jamaica succeeded. Women and children represented a large portion of the free population, especially in the colony's urban areas. Women were particularly noticeable in the flourishing commercial hub of Port Royal, where they cooked, cleaned, ran taverns and brothels, and served a large and transient population of visitors. However, officials were less successful in implementing a society made up of orderly patriarchal households than initially expected; the heterogeneous colony, devoted to commerce and increasingly invested in the African slave trade, fostered increasingly egalitarian gender dynamics and created a liberal sexual culture far beyond their envisioning.

Gender, Marital Status, and Colonial Settlement

England's capture of Jamaica in 1655 gave the country a tenuous foothold in the Caribbean. For the first few years, Cromwellian soldiers scraped a meager living off of the land and engaged in occasional skirmishes with Spanish inhabitants who had fled to the northern coast. The Crown was eager to attract more settlers to secure the unpopulated and uncultivated areas. English control of the island could not be guaranteed until a permanent civilian population replaced the military garrison manned by sickly soldiers. Colonists would provide the labor needed to turn jungles into farms, and their investment would inspire them to defend the land from external attacks. From the start, beliefs about gender roles and marital status influenced imperial strategies to populate the colony. Officials in Jamaica and London considered married couples, not single men, to be the ideal settlers. Childbearing wives were crucial to their plans. English social order hinged upon the patriarchal family household, and men needed dependent wives and children to act as patriarchs. Furthermore, English women would give birth to much-needed laborers, soldiers, and consumers on the island.

Official plans to settle Jamaica, which linked gender, marital status, and sexuality to social stability, were not original. First appearing in the late sixteenth century, proponents of colonization proposed sending indigent men, women, and children to America as a means of solving England's overpopulation and widespread poverty.⁹ Such measures would both reduce the number of poor people at home and provide much-needed bodies to settle overseas territory.¹⁰ Authorities schemed to ship women they

⁹ Richard Hakluyt the Elder argued that English women could be employed in making linen in Virginia, to trade with England and the West Indies, "victual and labour being so cheape there." Peter Mancall, ed., *Envisioning America: English Plans for the Colonization of North America, 1580-1640* (Boston: Bedford Books, 1995), 13, 42.

¹⁰ At the end of the sixteenth century, vagrancy became a significant problem in England. The population in London grew from 120,000 to 200,000 between 1550-1600, and reached 375,000 by 1650. Domestic

identified as “redundant” or even pernicious to English society overseas. Poor women who were perceived as sexually immoral and threatening would be made useful in places like Virginia, providing male colonists with “a much needed boost to the white populations.”¹¹ Later in the seventeenth century, officials continued to deploy similar strategies in Jamaica. Regulating sexual behavior and establishing normative gender roles abroad were considered essential to England’s imperial success. While officials equated femininity with marital status and motherhood, their notions of masculinity were equally important to plans for settlement. Indeed, manhood also hinged upon marital status. Only men who married and established legitimate households could be considered adult patriarchs, and thereby ideal colonists. Single men were regarded as unreliable and undesirable settlers.

During the second half of the seventeenth century and well into the eighteenth century, policies were devised to attract single women, as well as reward married couples who moved to Jamaica with land and money. Three years after the conquest, for example, Governor Edward D’Oyley sent a letter to Virginians offering attractive land grants to colonists who relocated to Jamaica: single men would receive twenty acres, single women would be given ten acres, and married couples would be rewarded with thirty acres of free land.¹² Similar efforts were made to recruit families from the English islands of Bermuda and Nevis.¹³ The Governor also prioritized issuing marriage licenses to

reform efforts, such as putting the poor in prison, failed. Colonization offered an alternative outlet for the numerous poor. Mancall, 14.

¹¹ Morgan, *American Slavery, American Freedom*, 163.

¹² Edward D’Oyley to Captain Francis Emperor, June 20, 1658, “Extracts from Colonel D'Oyley's Journal, relating to Jamaica, 1653-1661,” Add. Mss., 12410, BL.

¹³ Amussen, 37.

clergy to quickly begin performing legal weddings.¹⁴ King James II also maintained the view that marriage was essential to colonial stability. Decades after D'Oyley's efforts, he ordered Governor Philip Howard to monitor marriage: "You are to take especial care that a table of marriages established by the canons of the church of England be hung up in every Church & . . . you are to endeavour to get a law pass'd in the Assembly for the strict observation of the said Table."¹⁵ The Crown's edict shows a widespread preoccupation with the marital status of colonists—one that equated legal marriage with social stability.

Colonial governors also rewarded men with lucrative political posts based on their marital status. In 1672, Governor Thomas Lynch invited John White, a "chief justice and lawyer" who moved to Jamaica with his family, to join the Jamaica Council, which acted as the Governor's advisory board. White was invited not because of his legal training, but "because of his family wee thought fitt to add him."¹⁶ The Governor considered White's status as a husband and father an important qualification for office holding. Nearly two decades later, Governor William Beeston favored married men with positions in the Council. Beeston viewed bachelors with suspicion, treating them as capricious, unreliable, and unfit for office. Nearly all of the men whom he recommended were married. One man, Major Halse, ran a tavern with his wife. Another man, "Mr. Moreton," was chosen because he had recently married a wealthy local widow "by whom he has a good

¹⁴ In 1657 Governor D'Oyley offered a marriage license "to any minster to marry John Pearsicke and Judith Harper." "Extracts from Colonel D'Oyley's Journal, relating to Jamaica, 1653-1661," Add. Mss., 12410, BL.

¹⁵ "A Collection of Tracts relating to the Island of Jamaica, from 1503 to 1680," Add. Mss., 12429-12430, BL.

¹⁶ Sir Thomas Lynch to Lord Arlington, January 24, 1671 to December 27, 1672, 1654-1682, Papers Relating to the West Indies, Add. Mss., 11410, BL.

estate.”¹⁷ He also endorsed four other men who had “settled” families in the colony. The Governor considered all these men to be strong candidates because they were “housekeepers.” Having wives anchored them to the colony: “housekeepers” were less likely to leave Jamaica. In contrast, he dismissed a captain and a merchant on the grounds that “neither of them are housekeepers, or like to settle here.” In the Governor’s estimation, married men were more reliable, stable, and respectable members of society. Wives and children, not wealth or lineage, qualified men for office holding.

In certain respects, the effort to attract families of European descent—in particular women and children—to the island succeeded. Just seven years after British soldiers seized control of Jamaica, free women and children made up nearly a third of the island’s population.¹⁸ Eleven years later, they comprised half.¹⁹ The presence of women and children suggests that families, not just single men, migrated to the colony and that people frequently bore children once there. However, they were doing so in ways that diverged from imperial strategy. Women took on masculine roles and couples bore children out of wedlock, eschewing the official interest in populating the island with legitimate patriarchal households.

¹⁷ William Beeston, “A list of persons to fill up the vacancies that may happen in y’ council of Jamaica recommended by Sir Will. Beeston,” February 1, 1699, CO 137/5, f. 43, NAE.

¹⁸ “List of Men, Women, Children, Negroes, Arms, Acres Land by area on October 28, 1662 at Windsor’s departure,” Papers Relating to the West Indies, Add. Mss., 11410, BL.

¹⁹ The male population numbered 4,050 while the number of women had tripled to 2,002 and free children had increased to 1,712. The slave population ominously swelled from 552 to 9,504. 1673 population figures taken from Edward Long, *The History of Jamaica*, vol. 1 (London: 1774), p. 376.

Port Royal: The New Destination for Unfree Labor

By the 1680s, the colony had grown significantly—albeit in a decidedly different manner than colonial strategists envisioned—and its main town, Port Royal, manifested the deviation. Port Royal sprang up on a narrow spit of land that jutted out into the deep harbor on the island’s south coast. Its strategic location in the heart of the Caribbean Sea along the Spanish trade route to made the town an ideal gathering spot for English merchants, privateers, and pirates.²⁰ It had arguably become the wealthiest and most important seaport in England’s American empire. Jamaica now promised economic opportunities for men like John Taylor who travelled to the colony in 1686 to make his fortune. While there he filled his journal with some of the earliest, most vivid descriptions of the colony.²¹ Taylor portrayed Port Royal as a bustling boomtown possessing an “abundance” of punch houses, taverns, ordinaries, brothels, and coffee houses. An estimated 5,000 free English, Scottish, and Jewish inhabitants made it a multicultural and religiously diverse town. Unlike England, Jamaica established a policy of religious freedom, attracting people of all faiths, from Anglicans and Presbyterians to Quakers, Catholics, and Jews, all of whom lived “quietly and peaceably amongst another faithfully serving together in arms, for the defense of the island.” Merchants throughout the Atlantic basin flocked to Port Royal to obtain tropical produce—sugar, rum, indigo, and cocoa. Taylor marveled at the proliferation of trade. Ships arrived daily from England, bringing linen, silk, fruit, ironwork, pitch, tar, and rope. Others travelled from

²⁰ See Nuala Zahedieh, “The Merchants of Port Royal, Jamaica, and the Spanish Contraband Trade, 1655-1692,” *WMQ* 43, no. 4 (1986): 570-593.

²¹ I have used the original manuscript journal for my study: John Taylor, “Taylor’s Histories of his Life and Travells in America and other parts,” 1683-1687, MS. 105, NLJ. John Taylor’s journal was recently edited and published by David Buisseret: *Jamaica in 1687: The Taylor Manuscript at the National Library of Jamaica* (Kingston: The University of the West Indies Press, 2008).

Dublin to retail Irish provisions—beef, pork, salmon, cheese, and butter. Jamaica’s trading ties to mainland North America were also in evidence, with New York merchants carrying food, provisions, and materials for making rum and sugar casks.

Tellingly, the Crown-chartered Royal Africa Company imported “an abundance of negro slaves daily” into the port.²² Indeed, Port Royal’s free population was equaled by the “negro” and “Indian” slaves who lived in the town. Their growing presence forewarned of the kind of society that was evolving on the island. At the end of the seventeenth century, the engagement with the Royal Africa Company granted free colonists greater access to slave labor. Together, the state and local inhabitants were turning the island into a slaveholding colony, with Port Royal at the epicenter of the British slave trade.²³ Jamaica was quickly becoming the apotheosis of England’s imperial prowess, bolstered by the Crown’s investment in African slavery.

Port Royal merchants extravagantly displayed their newly minted wealth. According to Taylor they lived “at the height of splendor,” their “sumptuously arrayed” tables groaning under the weight of a cornucopia of local and imported food, from “good and wholesome meats, fowls, fish and fruits” to “salt meats from England,” along with cheesecakes, custards, and tarts. Indeed, the only thing Taylor found lacking was “good soft bread.”²⁴ Merchants were served by “negro slaves, which always wait on them in livery”; living emblems of the conspicuous consumption made possible by Atlantic trade and unfree labor. But merchants were not the only ones who prospered in Port Royal. Mechanics, blacksmiths, carpenters, bricklayers, shoemakers, tailors, upholsters, hatters,

²² Taylor, “Taylor’s Histories of his Life and Travells in America and other parts,” 1686, 135.

²³ For more on the role of the Royal Africa Company in the expansion of the British Empire see: Swingen, *Competing Visions of Empire*; Pettigrew, “Free to Enslave.”

²⁴ Taylor, “Taylor’s Histories of his Life and Travells in America and other parts,” 1686, 132-133.

rope makers, painters, comb makers, and washerwomen all lived “very well, earning three times the wages in England” and were “able to maintain their families much better” in the colony. Men like Taylor were drawn to the colony in the hopes of tapping into its wealth.

The busy seaport Taylor experienced differed dramatically from the small Spanish outpost Edmund Hickeringill had helped to overtake twenty years earlier. Likewise, the political landscape he lived in had been altered dramatically. Unlike Hickeringill, a staunch nonconformist and Cromwellian supporter, John Taylor grew up during the Restoration. He was a Royalist and a fierce devotee of the monarchy—so much so that he fought in the King’s army against the Earl of Argyll during the Monmouth Rebellion.²⁵ Yet, in spite of the political and religious differences that distinguished Hickeringill’s generation from Taylor’s, the two men shared similarly strong views on gender, marriage, and sexuality, which in turn shaped their perceptions of Jamaica. Taylor, like Hickeringill, portrayed women as sexually powerful and deceptive tricksters. His preoccupation with gender issues began before he travelled to Jamaica, as he searched for a wife. After fighting in the King’s army, Taylor moved to London where he became “melancholy and sick” upon learning that a female cousin he pined after “had fixed hir love on another.” Jilted, Taylor courted a second “gentlewoman” who had a “comly, and pleasant aspect, but not soo excelling others,” and decided that he “fancyd her not.”²⁶ Taylor’s troubled courtship took a turn for the worse when he was arrested, put in jail, and held liable for £1,000 by a third woman who “pretended” he had promised to marry, producing a “forged” letter in her “malicious” design against him. Taylor narrowly escaped

²⁵ Ibid., 53.

²⁶ Ibid., 107-108.

prosecution, which caused him “much trouble” and cost a great deal of money. Feeling himself disappointed and deceived in love, Taylor “resolved to be more wary” of women because “malice could lie hid, under the show of friendship.”²⁷

His resolve was short-lived. A year later Taylor was married and expecting his first child. The young man had propelled himself from a rocky and potentially ruinous courtship into a seemingly happy marriage, describing his wife as “the better half of his soul.” Yet, while marriage brought emotional peace to the young man, he was financially destitute: in selling off his family estate to pay his debts, he reduced his fortune to £68! Unable to support his wife and unborn child, Taylor determined with “much true sorrow” to leave his new family and improve his fortune in Jamaica. As official strategies demonstrate, families were encouraged to travel together to the colony. But Taylor certainly would not risk taking his pregnant wife on the long voyage. He left England filled with “melancholy” but hopeful that “he might gett whatever to maintain himself, hir, and his family” in Jamaica.²⁸ Taylor’s decision shows how Britain’s expansion overseas influenced ordinary people’s lives, providing potential opportunities but also separating families.

While Taylor’s wife remained at home, women continued to play important roles in his life. Indeed, they were central to his colonial business venture. Taylor was hired to oversee the transportation and sale of English convicts in Jamaica as indentured laborers. The demand for labor in America made transportation to the colonies an increasingly popular punishment for criminals. As the historian Abigail Swingen observes, transportation “represented the further intertwining of imperialism and violence and the

²⁷ Ibid., 122.

²⁸ Ibid., 135.

use of the empire as corrective ‘tool’ of the state.”²⁹ During the reigns of Charles II and James II, political prisoners were transported to America, including more than 800 men who were captured after the Monmouth Rebellion.³⁰ Taylor acted as one of the middlemen hired by the Crown to bring prisoners to the Caribbean. He received convicts, paying for their food and passage in return for the profit from selling them. Two of the four prisoners Taylor assumed responsibility for were women—Ann Sharp and Susanah Carslodon—whom he identified as “convicted felons” without elaborating on their crimes.³¹

Once aboard the ship, Taylor transitioned from loving husband to harsh prison warden. In addition to the four convicts he brought aboard, Taylor seems to have been responsible for overseeing all of the other transports on the ship. From his perspective, men and women alike were dangerous criminals who rightfully deserved punishment, and his coercive handling of them did not elicit moral quandary. Little distinguished Taylor’s treatment of male from female charges. All four went aboard, shackled in “irons,” “secured” below deck, and fed a daily ration of bread. Taylor’s control was far from absolute. The prisoners conspired to escape and “cut off their irons”; therefore Taylor chained all of the men below deck. At another time, his charges stole forty-six bottles of claret and “got drunk.” Later in the voyage, Taylor relaxed his guard, taking all of the convicts out of their chains except for a “Popish” man and an Irish boy named Trig. They were “so disorderly” that Taylor had them “chained down in a dark part of ship” to “resolve their stubborn spirits.”³² The women, who posed less of a physical threat to the

²⁹ Swingen, *Competing Visions of Empire*, Chapter 1.

³⁰ Ibid., 15.

³¹ Taylor, “Taylor’s Histories,” 144.

³² Ibid., 1686, 166.

crew, were kept in leg irons but allowed to walk above deck. Aside from this allowance, they received no other gender-specific attention. Being a woman was not enough to merit special treatment. Taylor, like most English people at the turn of the eighteenth century, categorized women by marital status, lineage, economic position, religion, and sexual virtue. The women criminals Taylor transported were the most despised and disparaged members of English society, many having committed sexual crimes such as fornication, bastardy, or prostitution. They corrupted English society and could only redeem themselves as useful laborers to help build the nation's empire overseas.

Little distinguished Taylor's handling of white transports from the treatment of Africans aboard slave ships. They were chained, starved, held in dark quarters, and frequently beaten. On arrival in Port Royal, they were sold in a similar manner. Sales took place in the evening, in order to give potential buyers time to examine the laborers. At the start of the sale, as was "the custom," the ship's captain raised his flag and fired a gun in the air. All of the convicts aboard the ship were sold, except for one man who "fell overboard and drowned," perhaps finding death preferable to years of hard labor. Taylor received £51 for the male servants sold; the women fetched £38 and £34. Thus, he made a profit of £33 after paying the captain for their passage and food—less than he had anticipated. Taylor participated in the convict trade at a moment in the colony's settlement when many categories of unfree laborers, from indentured servants and convicts to African and Indian slaves, were being exploited to fill the unrelenting demand for workers in America. He was part of a new class of entrepreneurs who profited from this demand, and his activities were the kind that helped to make Jamaica's port towns—first Port Royal and then Kingston—the primary depots for English slave ships.

Sin City: Gender Reversals and Sexual Excesses

Port Royal was a new kind of Atlantic city dominated by a new kind of merchant wholly devoted to transatlantic trade, a large part of which consisted in slaves. Its mercantile focus on profits and its reputation for licentious pleasures also encouraged a greater measure of tolerance, which English visitors portrayed as moral laxity. To Englishmen like Taylor, Port Royal was a “good times” town: a “loose place” “filled with all manor of debauchery.” Its inhabitants lived in a boozy haze, drinking wine, sangria, or a “jolly bowl of good punch” in the town’s many taverns; entertaining themselves with bull-, bear-, and boar-baiting; engaging in billiards, cock fighting, target shooting, and visiting music houses; and feasting on syllabub, cream, and tarts.³³ Like the governors who sought to promote married men over bachelors, Taylor blamed single men—privateers and “debauched wild blades”—for the culture of lawlessness that “daily executions” could not abate. Women were also important denizens of the “new model” town. In 1671, free women and children accounted for half of Port Royal’s population, while men made up only thirty five percent and slaves sixteen percent.³⁴ Free women worked as shopkeepers, servants, washerwomen, barmaids, tavern keepers, and prostitutes: full members of Port Royal’s flourishing service economy.

Locals also enjoyed a sexual culture that disturbed Taylor. He was particularly repulsed by the women: a “crew of vile strumpets, and common prostitutes” and a “walking plague” who “infected” the island with venereal disease. Like his predecessor Edmund Hickeringill, Taylor attributed social disorder to female sexuality. The women

³³ Ibid., 134.

³⁴ 735 men, 539 women, 470 children and 323 slaves lived in Port Royal. “An answer to the Inquiries given to Mr. Secretary Esq. Slingsby to Mr. Gaywood in the Pelican,” November 29, 1671, Papers Relating to the West Indies, Add. Mss., 11410, BL.

were “hott amazons” whose sexual savagery made it “almost impossible to civilize” the colony. Their licentiousness was insatiable: “neither the cage, whipping, nor ducking stools”—the standard means of punishing witches and wayward women in England—“would prevail” against them.³⁵ In Taylor’s estimation, promiscuous women rendered Jamaica a vulgar and chaotic place that was decidedly different from England. Near the end of the seventeenth-century, Taylor saw “Creolians,” or people of English descent born on the island, as a distinctive ethnic and even racial group. Island-born colonists, he claimed, were physiologically different from Englishmen. They reached maturity by age fifteen, began to decline at twenty, and rarely survived past thirty-five. Creolians had “thin bodies, pale complexions,” and “light flaxen hair.” Their dress presented them as half-English and half-savage: they wore “good linen but often barefooted without shoes or stockings.”

Not surprisingly, Taylor lavished most of his commentary on “common” women who wore only smocks (undergarments). These half-dressed and barefoot “Amazons” strode about town with a “warlike posture,” adorned with manly hats and “tobacco pipes in their mouths.” Rather than respecting gender boundaries, they would “booze a cup of punch...with anyone.” In Taylor’s estimation, the American environment had turned women of English descent into entirely different creatures. “Common” or poorer white women bore a striking resemblance to English descriptions of indigenous women in Virginia or Africa. On the one hand, they were sexually alluring, scantily clad and seemingly promiscuous. On the other hand, they were masculinized, wearing hats, smoking pipes, and carousing in taverns. Authors also described the English poor as savage and promiscuous. Yet, Taylor’s depiction of “Creolian” women as “warlike” or

³⁵ Taylor, “Taylor’s Histories,” 134.

“amazons” suggests strength and autonomy—not just poverty and degradation. These women intimidated him because they acted like men. Like indigenous people in America or Africa, Taylor observed, “Creolians” were developing distinctive gender dynamics and family arrangements. The “common sort” disavowed English tradition and law when it came to marriage and “seldom marry according to the ceremony of church.” Instead, couples “live together, and beget children, and if they fall out, or disagree, they part friendly by consent.”³⁶ Organized religion and the Crown, it would seem, did not play a powerful role in Creolians’ lives. Colonists displayed little interest in continuing the religious and political strife that had roiled the British Isles for nearly two centuries. Nor were they interested in regulating people’s sexual behavior. Men and women alike pursued sexual and romantic relationships outside of the bounds of legal marriage in the church, and they practiced self-divorce when they chose to, again without facing legal restriction or social ostracism.

A different kind of gendered social order was emerging in Jamaica: one defined by more egalitarian gender dynamics that allowed free women greater autonomy. As the scholar Sarah Yeh observes, “the prevalence of women in positions of power and influence as managers of estates or political intermediaries” in Jamaica was “particularly disconcerting” for English observers.³⁷ Men like Hickeringill and Taylor perceived all forms of women’s authority—economic, legal, and social—as threatening. Reducing women’s wide-ranging power to sexual power, and focusing on female sexuality, mitigated real or perceived threats to patriarchal authority. By re-inscribing a specific definition of femininity onto colonial women and presenting them only in sexualized

³⁶ Ibid., 134.

³⁷ Yeh, “A Sink of All Filthiness,” 68.

terms, authors could at least constrain women's power on a discursive level. Seventeenth-century texts were already defining Jamaica by its aberrant sexual culture and unruly women. Upon garnering this reputation, the island joined the southerly colonies, including Virginia and Barbados that had already characterized as sites of "rampant prostitution" in print culture.³⁸

Twelve years after Taylor travelled to Port Royal, Edward ("Ned") Ward published a popular satirical tract describing his experiences in Jamaica that embellished upon the themes of colonial gender and sexual disorder. Unlike Taylor, who compiled a private journal, Ward was a relatively well-known author whose sixteen-page pamphlet—*A Trip to Jamaica*, first printed in 1698—went through seven more editions in his lifetime. The low cost and brevity of his text made it accessible to a large audience of readers, shaping the English public's perception of Jamaica. Unlike Taylor, who strove for accurate observation, Ward's account was intentionally satirical. While he mocked people like Taylor who travelled to Jamaica lured by tales of gold "more plentiful than ice, silver than snow, pearl than hailstones," Ward also went to the island to restore his own fortune. Instead of wealth, he encountered a profusion of women. Before he even set foot on the island, he had conjured up an image of one of Taylor's "Creolians," describing her in racialized and sexualized terms as a "Lacker-fac'd Creolean," "a Gypsy, a tawny Fac'd Moletto Strumpet, a Pumpkin colour'd Whore."³⁹ The degenerate Creole whom he never met had supposedly stolen the husband of an English woman aboard his ship, who was traveling to the colony to reclaim her spouse from her rival. Apparently, the man had succumbed to the island's looser sexual mores and "Creolean" women

³⁸ Wilson, *The Island Race*, 144.

³⁹ Edward Ward, *A Trip to Jamaica: With a True Character of the People and Island, By the Author of Sot's Paradise* (London: 1699), 9.

whose ambiguous ethnicity and “gypsy”-like characteristics resembled Taylor’s savage half-dressed Amazons.

Yet Ward’s satire was decidedly more acid-tongued and vicious. While Taylor marveled at Port Royal’s commercial bustle, its heterogeneous populous, and prodigious fortunes, Ward described it as the “the dunghill of the universe” and “the refuse of the whole creation.” Taylor, who actually transported convicts to the colony, had helped to make it the “receptacle of vagabonds, the sanctuary of bankrupts, and a close-stool for all the purges of our prisons.” The island was “as sickly as an hospital, as dangerous as the plague, as hot as hell, and as wicked as the Devil.”⁴⁰ Ward depicted a tropical hell where enslaved Africans carried buckets of human excrement outside of the city, but the “nauseous efluvias, which arise from their stinking dunghills” filled Port Royal with a pestilent smell. While Taylor saw a bounty of delectable food gracing the tables of Port Royal’s elite, Ward dined on the local African-inspired pepper pot soup and felt it to be an “excellent breakfast for a salamander.”⁴¹ Even the local food evoked a malignant female sexuality: the fowl that he tasted was “dry as the udder of an old woman”; a fruit was “so acidic” that it was a “much fitter fruit to recover lost maidenheads” than to eat; the “physik-nuts” were “like a beautiful woman well drest, and infectious.”⁴²

Local women, like local food, were equally grotesque and sexualized. Most, according to Ward, were criminals who had fallen into “disgrace” in England, who had been shipped over to Jamaica by men like Taylor “where they may be Wicked without shame, and Whore without punishment.” Driven by their own insatiable lust, such

⁴⁰ Ibid., 14.

⁴¹ Ward was not alone in his commentary on local cuisine. Sir Hans Sloane and Thomas Tryon also commented on the bizarre and seemingly threatening West Indian diet. Amussen, *Caribbean Exchanges*, 55-57.

⁴² Ward, *A Trip to Jamaica*, 15.

women were fit for prostitution, but certainly unfit for English society. In Jamaica, they could act with abandon and “vie in wickedness with the Devil.” Whereas Taylor represented “Creolian” women powerfully but somewhat vulgarly striding about town, Ward cast them in more decidedly negative terms. He interpreted their independence as “impudence” and their striking way of moving as an artifice of “studi’d” grace” that was also “lewd” and sexually provocative. While Taylor’s women would jovially share a cup of punch with anyone, Ward claimed that “swearing, drinking, and obscene talk” were the “principle qualifications” that rendered Creole women “acceptable to male conversation.” Modesty and virtue were “despised” in the colony, and “all sorts of vice encourag’d, by both sexes.” In Ward’s estimation, Port Royal was the “very Sodom of the Universe.”⁴³

The preoccupation with women’s sexuality in the writings of Hickeringill, Taylor, and Ward was certainly not original. All three authors recycled longstanding and popular misogynistic European traditions, projecting them onto colonial women. Yet, such cultural beliefs had real consequences for women. The fear of female power and the scapegoating of marginalized women led to massive witch-hunts and executions throughout Europe and England during the early modern period. In England, women continued to endure a range of punishments from humiliation to imprisonment for sexual activities that men engaged in with near impunity. But these three authors also divulge the existence of an alternative culture in Jamaica, where free women acted with greater independence. They were highly visible actors: bartering on the streets, crowding the bars, and running the brothels and taverns. Jamaica was hardly a masculine space governed by powerful patriarchs. On the contrary, it was the very autonomy free women commanded

⁴³ Ibid., 16.

that English visitors found so unsettling. While troubling to Taylor and Ward, locals had established a more egalitarian sexual culture that was decidedly less hostile toward women. Ward observed “both sexes” engaging in what he described as “vice.” Gender roles were blurred, and women assumed masculine characteristics and roles. They smoked pipes, drank, swore, and strode about town without facing repercussions. Indeed, if Ward is to be believed, rather than punishing wayward women, local men encouraged more mixed-gender socializing. People eschewed the strictures of Church and Crown, cohabiting together and bearing children outside of wedlock. Several decades after the English conquest of Jamaica, colonists had established a sexual culture and a gendered social order that was strikingly different from what existed in England. The changing nature of free women’s roles was at the heart of this difference.

In a matter of decades, colonists had constructed a profitable society in which a hostile slave population massively outnumbered them. They also lived in a strategically important location in the center of the Caribbean, making Jamaica chronically vulnerable to invasion by European powers during times of war. England was at war with France from 1689 to 1697, and French privateers raided the poorly defended island in 1694. These French attacks reveal how the colony’s religiously and ethnically diverse free population, while beneficial to commerce, could also spawn allegiances contrary to English interests. Governor William Beeston reported certain locals—especially Catholics, Irish supporters of James II, and colonists who wanted to escape their debts—had thrown their lots in with the French.⁴⁴ Women were primary actors in this perilous military fiasco, which nearly resulted in Jamaica’s becoming a French colony.

⁴⁴ William Beeston, “A Briefe Account of what happened in their Majesties Island of Jamaica during the time the French were Prepareing to Attacque,” 1694, CO 137/1, ff. 193-196, NAE.

According to Governor Beeston the wives of the two “worst traitors,” an Englishman named Grubin and an Irishman named Stapleton, actively plotted with the French, playing a risky game of political intrigue. Beeston considered Stapleton’s wife Elliner, who travelled with her husband to Jamaica before the raids, to be a serious security threat. He intercepted a letter Stapleton sent to her, implicating the woman in a plan to enlist slaves in Jamaica in attacks on the colony, thereby merging the threat of slave revolt with the military power of France. When Beeston seized Elliner for questioning, her husband retaliated. He abducted several English women from the island and held them ransom in exchange for his wife. The wife of the other “traitor” Grubin was equally dubious and important. Unlike Elliner, she used the conflict between the English and French to escape from her husband, fleeing to Jamaica where the Governor was forced to adhere to a diplomatic agreement offering her immunity in spite of her French connections. The woman acted the traitor to her spouse rather than her country, telling Beeston that her husband “used her very ill” and begging him for protection.

Personal and political overlapped in an unfolding drama. When the unhappy wife refused to be sent back to Grubin during a prisoner exchange, he, like his partner Stapleton, attacked women of Jamaica in an act of revenge, abducting “what women he could until he had his wife again.” Grubin’s crew landed ashore near the isolated home of the widow of a minister, stole her slaves and household goods, tortured her, stole her money, abducted her fourteen-year-old “mayden daughter,” and took the girl to a French colony. The distraught mother begged the Governor with “prayers and tears” to rescue her daughter. These were “Inhumantiyes beyond the usuall custom of warr amongst Christians,” so Beeston sent a flag of truce to the French general with a request that he

detain Grubin's privateer ships. England and France worked together in the Caribbean to orchestrate a hostage-exchange, returning the wives to Stapleton and Grubin in return for the English women who were being held ransom by enraged husbands.

Such abductions of European women were political acts that disturbed the traditional gender boundaries of warfare, so much so that they forced the Governor to negotiate with the French. The privateers violated the custom of sheltering women and children from warfare, thereby provoking a response. From the husbands' perspectives, the colonial Governor was holding their own wives as hostages. They retaliated with an equivalent response by seizing English women. Women thus became critical pawns in the midst of warfare. Despite these circumstances, Elliner Stapleton was anything but a pawn. Even as she sailed back to her husband, the opportunistic wife continued to grasp for political power. When she was dropped off in the Spanish colony of Hispaniola, she claimed that she possessed the authority to negotiate with the French on behalf of the Englishmen aboard the ship, urging the Spanish officials to allow her to handle their "dealings and correspondence with the French."

Free English, Irish, and island-born women became both agents and victims of military violence during the French raids of Jamaica. Indeed, Elliner Stapleton and her husband devised a military strategy that endangered English rule of the island. The Stapletons' plot to join the manpower of French soldiers with local slaves exposed the nature of Jamaica's vulnerability. She and Grubin's wife were high-profile political prisoners who adeptly manipulated an inter-imperial dispute to their own ends. The wives' activities show how women could become important players in European conflicts, especially in the Caribbean, where privateers and pirates blurred the line between military

and extra-military action. In this environment, gender roles were also blurred, and women assumed traditionally masculine roles, acting as diplomats, agents, and even double-agents.

The Growth of Slavery and the Re-Drawing of Gender Roles

The precariousness of colonial society created a need for more egalitarian relationships among free people. During the decades when Taylor, Ward, Stapleton, and Grubin travelled to the island, the island's slave population exploded. In 1673, the ratio between the 15,536 free and enslaved people was roughly equal. Twenty years later, in 1693, the free white population was roughly 7,365 while the slave population had swelled to 48,000. Slaves outnumbered free people by six to one, and thereafter the threat of slave revolt figured as an omnipresent feature of colonial life.⁴⁵ This threat materialized into reality in 1690 when Governor Insiquin reported the insurrection of 400 enslaved Africans he identified as "Coramantees" on a plantation in the middle of the island. The rebels killed one white man, seized 50 "fuzzess, blunderbuses and other arms, powder and ball," and then moved on to the next plantation, where they killed the overseer and tried to convince more slaves to join them before dispersing into the woods. Armed and provisioned slaves, the Governor believed, would continue to "pose a threat to mountain plantations," stressing the "great want" of white men in more remote plantations.⁴⁶

⁴⁵ Burnard, *Planters, Merchants, and Slaves*, 230.

⁴⁶ Governor William Earl of Insiquin to the Lords of Trade, August 31, 1690, CO 137/2, f. 134, NAE.

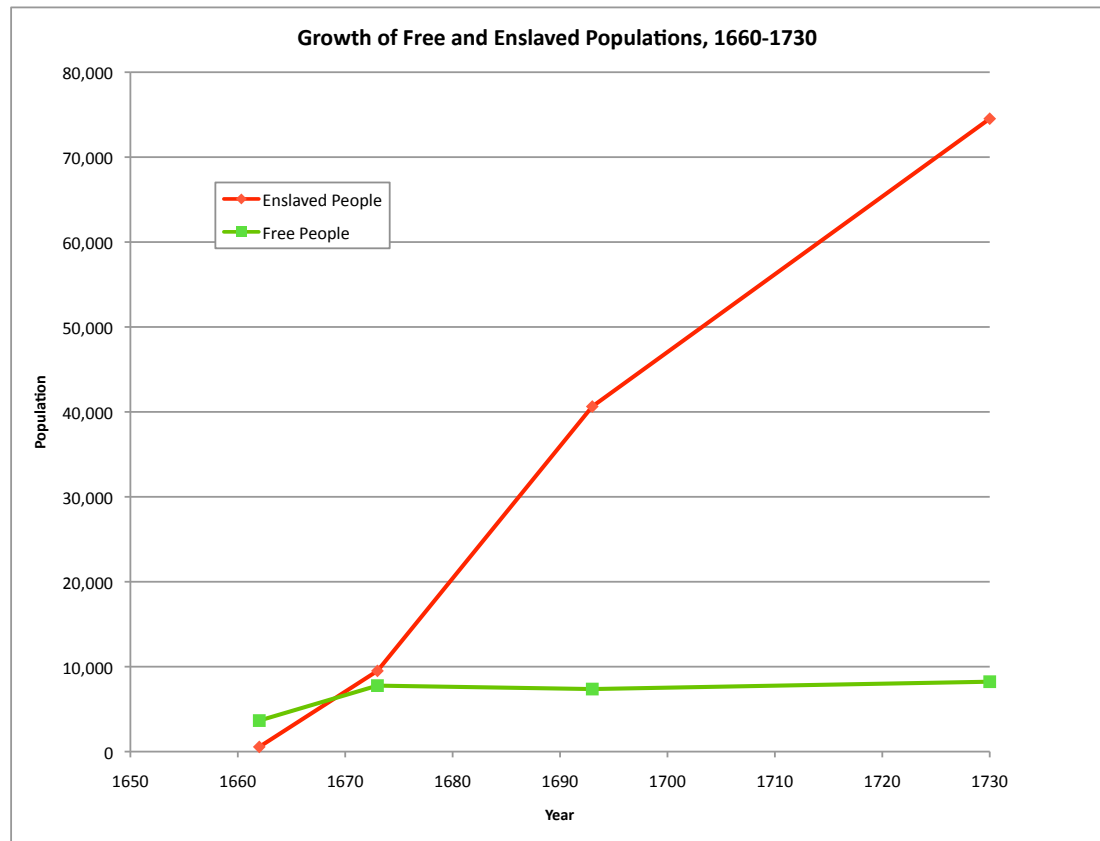


Figure 1.1. Growth of Free and Enslaved Populations, 1660-1730.

At the turn of the eighteenth century, colonial administrators in London were defining the large slave population as a threat to the security of the Empire. A successful slave revolt could wipe out free colonists, making Jamaica ripe for the taking by a European rival. Slavery—the chief generator of the colony’s wealth—also placed its survival at great risk. Outside of urban areas, slaves outnumbered free people by ten to one: a demographic ratio that would remain constant for the rest of the eighteenth century. The minority free population, always conscious of being outnumbered, was also aware of how easily they could be massacred. The colony’s topography increased this insecurity. Jamaica’s 7,000-foot central mountain range and large tracts of wilderness made tracking down runaway slaves or defending against invaders challenging. As Governor Hamilton

informed the Lords of Trade in 1712, distance, poor roads, and heavy rainstorms made traveling into more remote areas “more difficult than probably your lords can imagine.”⁴⁷ The threat of slave revolts created a culture of paranoia amongst free people, who employed increasingly brutal and coercive measures to subjugate the slave majority. Smaller uprisings realized this threat. In 1711, a group of slaves “committed [the] greatest villainy” and murdered their mistress. Governor Hamilton captured some of them but others fled and avoided recapture. He hoped other slaves “will not follow their example.”⁴⁸ Whatever the case, slaveholding begot a violent world, and violence was no respecter of persons. As slave owners, free men and women alike had placed themselves at great risk.

In less than fifty years, colonists created a society defined by profound inequality between free and enslaved, and the slave population continued to grow during the first decades of the eighteenth century. After the Royal Africa Company lost its monopoly on the slave trade in 1713, and private enterprisers moved in without fear of reprisal, the trade increased by sixty percent. Jamaica was one of the largest recipients of slaves.⁴⁹ At a higher level, slavery altered island society, making it increasingly difficult for authorities to protect its free inhabitants. Yet, rather than stem the growth of the slave trade, colonial administrators continued to focus on attracting families and single women to the island. In 1715, planters offered to pay for the passage of “all persons men and women not above forty-five or under ten years of age (Jews & Cripples accepted) who will go & settle in Jamaica.” They added a condition to the offer requiring settlers to stay

⁴⁷ Governor Hamilton to the Lords of Trade, May 15, 1712, CO 137/10, f. 33, NAE.

⁴⁸ Governor Hamilton to the Lords of Trade, January 13, 1711, CO 137/10, f. 16, NAE.

⁴⁹ Pettigrew, “Free to Enslave,” 33.

on the island for at least four years or “repay the Publick” for the cost of their voyage.⁵⁰ Four years later, Governor Nicholas Lawes urged the Crown to adopt the French way of populating its colony of Saint Domingue. Supposedly, every merchant ship travelling there was required to “carry over a man with his wife and family.” They were allotted land and a few slaves out of the public fund: “this makes them fixed settlers and industrious planters, and I wish such a method coul'd be proposed to settle this colony.” Confronted with governing a volatile society, Lawes placed great emphasis on creating order. Families who were “fixed” and “industrious” promised permanence and strength. He acted on this belief, sending an offer of free travel, ten acres of land, slaves, and tax exemptions to families who relocated from the British Virgin Islands.⁵¹ Echoing the language used by his predecessor Sir William Beeston, Lawes disparaged single men as “ruangadoes and a loose sort of people who are sent over servants for a term of years”; instead he offered land only to “industrious men with their wives and familys.”⁵² Single men remained undesirable settlers. Lawes continued to view marital status, rather than gender, as the most important aspect of a man’s status. Only husbands and fathers could be relied upon to become hard-working and permanent settlers.

As imperial authorities struggled to offset the peril posed by the extensive slave population, their plans increasingly stressed the importance of balancing free and enslaved populations rather than the older interest in replicating British-style patriarchal households abroad. In the early eighteenth century, the colonial government began to pass “Deficiency Acts” which taxed landowners who did not have enough white people

⁵⁰ “Memorial from several Planters and others concern'd in Jamaica, relating to the better peopling and planting that island,” March 25, 1715, CO 137/10, vol. 2, f. 355, NAE.

⁵¹ Nicholas Lawes, Letter sent with Captain Robert Jones of the Resolution to the Virgin Islands, October 31, 1720, CO 137/13, f. 276, NAE.

⁵² Nicholas Lawes to the Lords of Trade and Plantations, December 6, 1719, CO 137/13, f. 192, NAE.

living on their land relative to the number of slaves that they owned to protect their households from revolts. It was during these decades that the nascent racial category of “white” began to appear frequently in government papers. In 1722, Governor Henry Bentinck, the 1st Duke of Portland, claimed the island’s free population had decreased from 10,000 to 7,648 white men, women, and children. He proposed opening up vast tracts of uncultivated land, which were owned by a few wealthy individuals, for public interest and security. The Governor wanted to use land grants “to make it really and apparently advantageous to people of *both sexes* to transport themselves from abroad and settle amongst us.”⁵³ By 1731, colonial authorities were attributing their “unhappy situation of affairs” to the “increase and success of their rebellious negroes,” believing as they did that slaves outnumbered free people in every parish.⁵⁴ Five years later, the Assembly passed legislation which purportedly attracted 1,500 white inhabitants to the island with an offer of free land.⁵⁵ However, these repeated efforts to increase the free population and balance out the disparity between free and enslaved populations were largely unsuccessful.

⁵³ Emphasis is the author’s. Duke of Portland, “Address to the Jamaica Assembly,” October 1, 1722, CO 137/14, f. 257, NAE.

⁵⁴ “Jamaica to his majesty, relating to the unhappy situation of affairs of that island, by the increase and success of their rebellious negroes,” February 11, 1731, CO 137/19, NAE.

⁵⁵ This claim was made in 1752. “A State of the Island of Jamaica,” August 15, 1752, CO 137/25, f. 247, NAE.

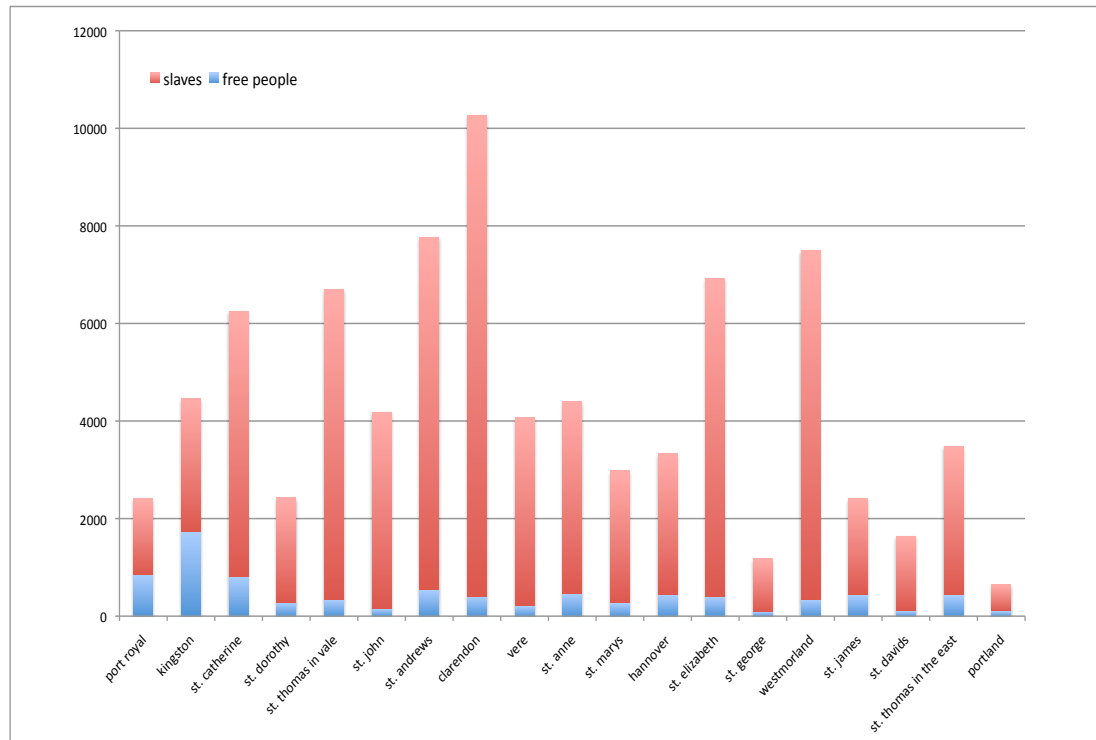


Figure 1.2. Comparison of Free and Enslaved Populations by Parish, 1731.

Yet, in spite of severe mortality rates, the number of free inhabitants remained remarkably stable, hovering close to 10,000 people during the first three decades of the eighteenth century. Furthermore, the free population was characterized by greater gender and age diversity than arguments about unequal gender ratios acknowledge. When the focus is shifted from plantation agriculture to Atlantic trade, free women come into view. Women and children clustered in the island's urban seaports and older parishes, while more remote and recently settled territory remained the province of men. Ratios between free and enslaved people were also less extreme in towns. By the 1730s, Port Royal, once the most vibrant hub of British trade in the Atlantic world, had declined. A terrible earthquake had reduced the city in 1692, killing thousands of people and submerging two-thirds of its area underwater. A major fire in 1703 further diminished the town. But a

growing movement to make Kingston the new seaport, situated in a more protected location on the harbor, met with resistance from Port Royal’s inhabitants—many of whom were women. Several, including the town’s “widows and orphans,” signed a petition claiming they had been “barred” from “resettling” in Port Royal after the fire.⁵⁶ While their resistance to Kingston was ultimately futile, women and children continued to constitute significant portions of the populations in both towns.

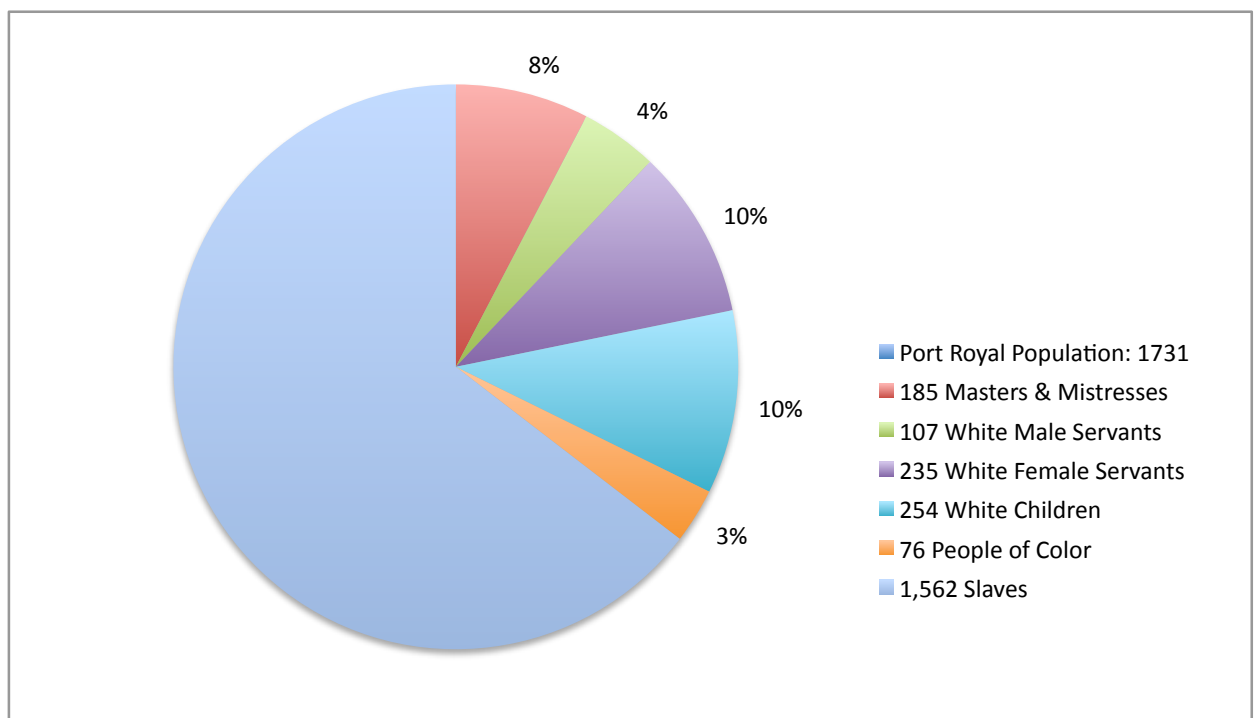


Figure 1.3. Port Royal Population, 1731.

⁵⁶ “Petition on behalf of the freeholders,” 1703, CO 137/6, f. 26, NAE.

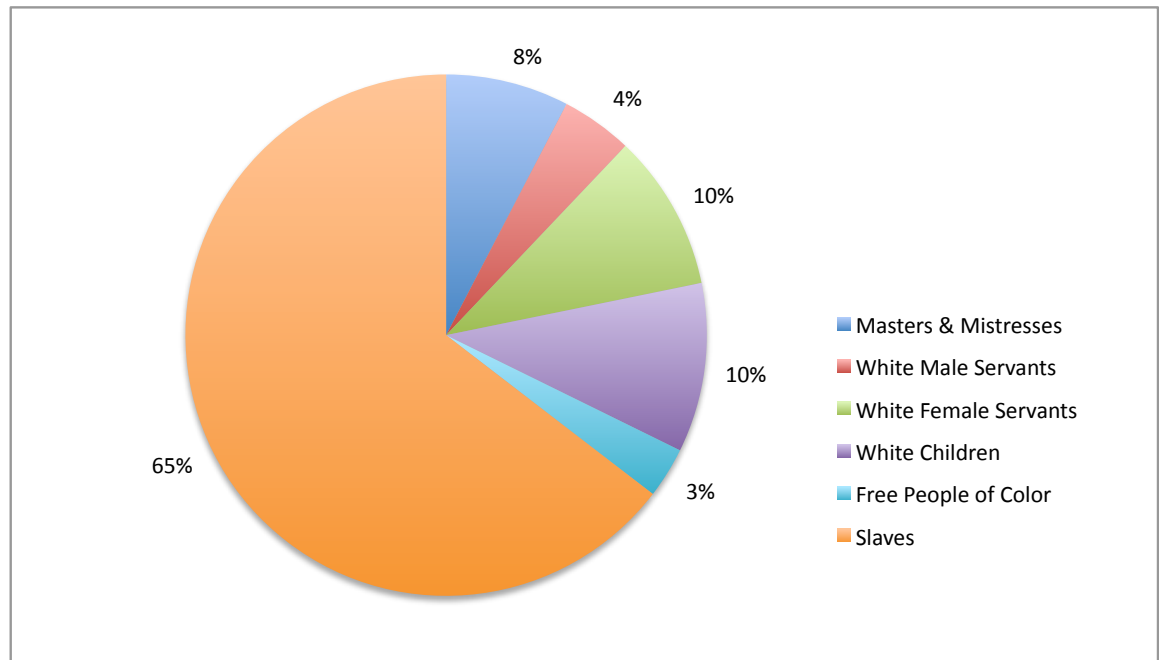


Figure 1.4. Kingston Population, 1731.

Census records crystallize the ongoing importance of women and families to the settlement of Jamaica. By 1731, white women likely outnumbered white men in Port Royal and gender ratios were roughly equal in Kingston.⁵⁷ White children comprised approximately one third of the free population in Port Royal and a quarter in Kingston. In sum, women and children made up roughly two thirds of the white population of the colony's most densely populated towns. Such empirical evidence requires us to reconsider claims about the importance of unequal gender ratios in constituting the island's social world. During the first decades of the eighteenth century, urban regions were not defined by an overwhelmingly masculine presence. On the contrary, the towns

⁵⁷ The record takers grouped "white masters and mistresses" together but given the number of white children it seems safe to assume that the numbers of masters and mistresses were roughly equal. Thus, an estimated 327 white women and 199 white men (including masters, mistresses and servants) lived in Port Royal. An estimated 516 white women and 607 men lived in Kingston. "Jamaica to his majesty, relating to the unhappy situation of affairs of that island, by the increase and success of their rebellious negroes." February 11, 1731, CO 137/19, vol. 2, NAE.

were home to married and unmarried couples that bore children and established households. Disparities between the free and enslaved populations were also less extreme in these urban areas. Slaves only outnumbered free people by a slight percentage in each town. However, differences between people within the category of “free” also became more finely tuned. Census takers identified the social and financial status, age, and gender of inhabitants, but also distinguished between white “masters,” “mistresses,” and servants and free people of African descent.⁵⁸ By the 1730s, racial categories were employed as an important means of defining people in Jamaican society.

Conclusion

At the start of the eighteenth century, officials in Jamaica and London, facing a rapidly and dramatically altered social landscape, struggled to devise policies that would avert slave uprisings and hostilities from European rivals. Instead of developing novel solutions, elite officeholders clung to the notion that they could attract enough white settlers to the island with land grants to offset the disproportionate increase of the slave population. In 1752, nearly one hundred years after the British takeover, free passage and government lands were still being offered to families who moved to new and sparsely populated parishes. As local politicians confidently stated, “tis not doubted that families settled there will do very well, nor is it possible that any can do otherwise with such encouragement, that have the least industry and understand anything of husbandry.”⁵⁹

They assumed that families, not single individuals, constituted the most desirable settlers,

⁵⁸ Masters and mistresses held the highest social positions and were not distinguished by gender. White servants and free “negro, Indian and mulatto” were sorted by sex, whereas white and colored children were not. It is difficult to calculate the total number of free women in each parish because masters and mistresses were grouped together in a single category. Ibid., NAE.

⁵⁹ “A State of the Island of Jamaica,” August 15, 1752, CO 137/25, f. 247, NAE.

and they imagined the new landowners engaging in customary English-style “husbandry” in lieu of purchasing slaves and building plantations. Any effort to address the real problem—the massive importation of slaves—would have met with serious opposition from all who benefited from slavery on both sides of the Atlantic.

During the first half of the eighteenth century, the family household remained an important concept to both imperial strategists and local inhabitants. However, as the focus shifted from dreams of constructing a society modeled on British ideals to contend with serious security risks, so too did the emphasis on customary gender roles. Notions of gender difference, which linked masculinity with patriarchal authority and femininity with dependency and submission, faded. In a colony defined by its slave majority population and extremely high mortality rates, free people turned toward more egalitarian relationships between the sexes as one means of survival. Free women were increasingly desirable for their ability to give birth and provide a much-needed boost to the free population. Fertility grew to be more important than marital status and sexual propriety. Privileging free white men—a minority within a minority population—proved an elusive and even impractical goal. Both sexes were too deeply invested in sustaining the fragile world they had created, which revolved around slaveholding.

CHAPTER TWO

The “Libertine” Island:

Gender, Nonmarital Relations, and the Emergence of a Colonial Sexual Culture

Anecdotes of adultery, incest, infanticide, and polygamy peppered the letters Rector James White in Jamaica sent to the Bishop of London in the 1720s. According to White, colonists of all ranks engaged in sexual improprieties with impunity. One man, a Judge of the Court of Common Pleas who had only a “grammar school education,” was living “as a married person with his Brother's wife.” Rather than being socially ostracized, the adulterous woman was treated by the “greatest of our females” “as if she was the chastest woman in the world”; all society seemed to happily socialize with the Judge's “incestuous wife, w/out any ceremony more than she was a virtuous woman.” Another man, a married member of the Governor's Council, kept “a whore and her mother openly at his house” and paraded around the island with her. Even a man who was “believed by all the parish that he got a child with his own Daughter,” seemed to escape local condemnation.¹ White found the sexual attitudes of colonists morally repugnant. In calling “them to account” for their actions, he noted the absence of legal and social

¹ James White to Unknown Lord, March 5, 1724, Fulham Papers, vols. 17 and 18, West Indies, 1661-1739, LPL.

measures. He described profligate men and women who were “companions to the best persons in the Island” and treated “better than the most moral of the Clergy.” Even church officials indulged in the excesses of island lust. According to White, colonists engaged in an endless orgy of sexual sin.

Writing during the 1720s, the Rector continued in the tradition established by John Taylor and Ned Ward of eroticizing the colony and equated its sexual culture with social disorder. Twenty years after Ward published *A Trip To Jamaica*, the island’s moral degradation had worsened in his estimation. Locals made a mockery of marriage and defiled traditional family relationships. Rather than regulating such behaviors, political and religious officials participated in them. Only greater intervention by outsiders could remedy a social disaster of such magnitude. During the eighteenth century, Jamaica’s reputation as a site of sexual disorder, where colonists abandoned British marital customs and gender conventions, continued to grow. As Sarah Pearsall has argued, the “apparent unwillingness of Anglo-Jamaicans, both women and men, to replicate metropolitan ideals and family models was an especially problematic form of family disorder and illegitimacy.”² The island’s lenient sexual culture made it difficult to enforce sexual double standards, enabling free women to act outside of the bounds of traditional feminine propriety. Colonists’ seemingly blasé attitudes—their lack of concern towards what visitors like White deemed to be aberrant or immoral behavior—provoked the ire of contemporaries. Their disinterest in linking sexual control to social order offered evidence in itself of colonial corruption. It was early modern British observers who

² Sarah Pearsall *Atlantic Families: Lives and Letters in the Late Eighteenth Century* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2008), 69.

defined Jamaica as a site of “family disorder” and “illegitimacy.” Local inhabitants did not.

While the discourses developed by British visitors like White helps provide insight into the metropolitan perspective on the association between gender, race, sexuality, and empire, they tell us little about the colonists themselves. This chapter studies the intimate interactions between local inhabitants across boundaries of gender, race, status, and slavery. Instead of focusing on representation and policy, it explores the sexual practices of individuals.³ During the first half of the eighteenth century, regulating sexual behavior remained a low priority, as authorities contended with other threats to social stability, including a growing slave majority, the Maroon War, high mortality rates, and the threat of invasion by other European powers. In the absence of institutional controls, colonists developed a permissive sexual culture, pursuing a broad spectrum of nonmarital romantic, sexual and companionate relations. While the lack of oversight resulted in widespread sexual exploitation of enslaved people, some free/enslaved couples developed meaningful relationships. As a result, the population of free people of African descent continued to grow during this time, and colonial families frequently included legitimate and illegitimate children who were free and enslaved.

The history of sexual practices of free women of European and African descent, as well as enslaved women, suggests an evolving relationship between gender, race, slavery, and social power.⁴ Free white women, in particular, benefited from a relaxation

³ This chapter seeks to “move beyond a discussion of sexual regulation as political strategy to explore how peoples’ interactions continually pushed against government-imposed regulations” and better theorize the “sexual behaviors of individuals.” Kirsten Fischer and Jennifer Morgan, “Sex, Race, and the Colonial Project,” *WMQ* 60, no. 1 (2003): 197-198.

⁴ White male sexuality in slaveholding colonies has already received much scholarly attention. A short list of works includes: Burnard, *Mastery, Tyranny, and Desire*; Douglas Hall, *In Miserable Slavery: Thomas Thistlewood in Jamaica 1750-1786* (Kingston: University of the West Indies Press, 1998); Lockridge, *On*

of customary moral controls. In eighteenth-century Britain, and elsewhere in the empire, the Church and Crown policed female sexuality. Women who challenged conventions and engaged in illicit sex risked public censure and prosecution in Britain.⁵ Jamaican courts, in contrast, were not used to punish women for sexual activities that were customarily considered to be crimes, including fornication, adultery, prostitution, and abortion.⁶ Nor were locals intent upon socially castigating wayward women. Instead, colonists invested in protecting wealth for future generations. The enforcement of a sexual double standard requiring female virtue was lax, and free women faced less pressure to marry as a means of protecting their sexual reputations. As a result, they pursued nonmarital relations and bore illegitimate children at high rates, all the while protecting the fragile authority and independence they held as spinsters and widows. Their sexual practices undermine the longstanding contrast between “unmitigated masculine brutality” and the “powerlessness and sexlessness of Anglo-American women,” clarifying how the growth of a permissive sexual culture simultaneously enhanced free women’s sexual autonomy while also sanctioning sexual violence against slaves.⁷

the Sources of Patriarchal Rage: The Commonplace Books of William Byrd and Thomas Jefferson and the Gendering of Power in the Eighteenth Century (New York: New York University Press, 1994) and *ibid.*, *The Diary, and Life, of William Byrd II of Virginia*; Rhys Isaac, *Landon Carter's Uneasy Kingdom* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2005).

⁵ Kirsten Fischer, for example, finds that courts punished women who transgressed normative gender ideals in colonial North Carolina. *Suspect Relations*, 156. For more on this subject in early America, see Sharon Block, *Rape and Sexual Power in Early America* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2006); Cornelia Dayton, *Women Before the Bar: Gender, Law, and Society in Connecticut, 1639-1789* (Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina Press, 1995); Lyons, *Sex Among the Rabble*. For more on sexuality in early modern Britain, see Anthony Fletcher, *Gender, Sex, and Subordination in England, 1500-1800* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1999); Froide, *Never Married*; Tony Henderson, *Disorderly Women in Eighteenth-Century London: Prostitution and Control in the Metropolis, 1730-1830* (New York: Longman, 1999); Tim Hitchcock, *English Sexualities, 1700-1800* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 1997).

⁶ The author has examined records from the colonial Chancery Court and the Grand Court.

⁷ Sarah Pearsall raises this point. “The Late Flagrant Instance of Depravity in My Family’: The Story of an Anglo-Jamaican Cuckold,” *WMQ* 60, no. 3 (2003): 581.

Atlantic Currents; Local Circumstances

Island attitudes toward sex emerged in the late seventeenth century, when conceptions of sexuality were changing throughout the Anglo-Atlantic world. The Restoration of Charles II ushered in a more liberal and open sexual culture in England. Women like Nell Gwyn acted on stage for the first time and then publically became the King's mistress, breaking longstanding boundaries of gender and status. The figures of the rake and the fop emerged as sexual types, while understandings of sexual subjectivities as distinctive from gender identity gained popularity.⁸ In the early eighteenth century, libertine values were linked to gentility in Britain and early America. Planters in the southern colonies were particularly eager to associate themselves with elites in Britain, using sex as a means of signifying the "freedom and panache" of a genteel lifestyle.⁹ Jamaican colonists participated in this sexual culture, which was spreading throughout the Anglo-Atlantic world from London to South Carolina and Philadelphia.

Local circumstances also strongly influenced attitudes toward gender roles, sexual behavior, and marriage. The island's wealth and its investment in slavery continued to expand during the first half of the eighteenth century: by 1740, Jamaica was on the cusp of becoming Britain's most valuable colony.¹⁰ The ever-increasing population of enslaved Africans created an urgent need for protection, and the nascent penal system was invested in controlling slaves, not policing sexuality. Additionally, conflict with the

⁸ Richard Godbeer, "The Cry of Sodom": Discourse, Intercourse, and Desire in Colonial New England," *WMQ* 52, no. 2 (1995): 259-286. However, Clare Lyons observes that the dynamic between gender and sexual intimacy remained more complex than the contemporary binary categories of "heterosexual-homosexual" allow for. "Mapping an Atlantic Sexual Culture: Homoeroticism in Eighteenth-Century Philadelphia," *WMQ* 60, no. 1 (2003): 125-127.

⁹ Richard Godbeer, *Sexual Revolution in Early America* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2004), 191-192.

¹⁰ Greene, *Pursuits of Happiness*, 159-160.

Maroons—the descendents of escaped slaves who asserted their independence—intensified between 1725 and 1739. The Maroons waged a successful guerilla war against local residents and the British Army, greatly increasing the threat of slave revolt until Britain acknowledged defeat and signed a peace treaty in 1739. Mortality rates among the free population also remained very high, creating demographic instability. Vastly outnumbered by a slave majority, all free people were valuable to the colony irrespective of gender or reputation. Authorities who remained intent upon attracting families and single women to the island could ill afford to punish and imprison the slender free population. Colonial Governors and Council and Assembly members had more pressing financial, military, and political demands to attend to. Policing people's religious and sexual activities took a back seat to perils that threatened the colony.

The weak institutional presence of the Church of England also contributed to a more lenient sexual culture. The Church did not establish ecclesiastical courts on the island to litigate moral and sexual crimes as they did in Britain. The colonial government's policy of religious tolerance towards Jews, Quakers, and even Catholics, which had been established in the seventeenth century, also continued. As Rector James White complained, "any Jew, Turk, Mahometan, Papist may teach publick school, provided he does not openly profess his Religion." The enslaved African majority brought their own diverse spiritual beliefs and practices to the island. Such a diversity of beliefs made it difficult for authorities to establish a standard moral code dictating marriage and sexual behavior, nor did they have the resources to enforce one. Visiting clergymen assumed that colonists were disinterested in religion, claiming elites preferred to socialize and tradesmen to work on the Sabbath. Planters ignored slaves' spiritual

conditions entirely. The absence of a strong Church, they believed, promoted an irreligious culture of sin, as evidenced in people's sexual behavior. While the Church's official teachings on religious morality reached fewer people, those of British descent were not irreligious. Colonists valued the English customs of marriage and especially baptism, but newer parishes lacked adequate churches and clergymen to serve local populations. People developed alternative spiritual practices: reading bibles at home and burying loved ones on family land in the absence of parish graveyards.

All of these factors led to the growth of spiritual and sexual syncretism. In the absence of the traditional institutions that enforced social control—the Crown and the Church—and facing devastating mortality rates, colonists adopted a more permissive and flexible approach towards sexual behavior. While clergymen complained that colonists laughed at any criticism of their actions, telling them to “mind their own business,” minding one's own business characterizes local attitudes toward spiritual and sexual practice.¹¹ Free families, like the colonial government, invested their energy into earning and protecting wealth, in order to provide for future generations. Slavery was central to this objective, which also shifted attention toward coercing recalcitrant and potentially dangerous laborers. Free people's sexual activities received less interest, expanding the realm of acceptable sexual practices.

Evidence of free people initiating legal actions against each other for sexual crimes, including fornication, bastardy and sodomy, does not appear in court records. Even married elite women who committed adultery emerged with money and reputations intact, despite public knowledge of their actions. Two high-profile cases illustrate this

¹¹ James White to Bishop Gibson, April 23, 1724, Fulham Papers, vols. 17 and 18, West Indies, 1661-1739, LPL.

point. In 1739 Edward Manning took the unusual step of seeking a divorce from his wife Elizabeth by a private act of Parliament, claiming she had committed adultery.¹² Her lover was supposedly Peter Beckford, a member of one of the wealthiest, most politically powerful families on the island. Witnesses accused Elizabeth of “cohabiting with Mr. Beckford in his own house” while married, although nobody offered evidence of the couple “being seen in bed together.”¹³ The Crown refused to dissolve the Manning marriage on the grounds that the adultery was not “positively proven.” Even if the divorce had been granted Elizabeth would have had the right to remarry and be paid back the £2,143 portion she brought to the marriage—hardly punitive punishments.¹⁴ Sarah Pearsall has shown that another woman was treated with leniency for more dramatic adulterous activities. Ann Tharp was accused of committing adultery with her son-in-law, who fathered her illegitimate daughter.¹⁵ While Ann and her husband separated, she retained her social reputation and received a generous annuity from her husband, who remained fond of her despite her infidelity. Suggestively, neither woman faced community censure or experienced financial hardships as a result of extramarital activities. The colony’s leading men showed as little interest in punishing women as they did in regulating their own actions. While it is plausible that Elizabeth Manning and Ann Tharp escaped harsh treatment because they were wealthy and white, it is also difficult to imagine their adulterous behavior being treated as lightly in Britain. In Jamaica, it seems,

¹² In Britain, divorce by act of Parliament was costly and rare. Parliament granted only 325 divorces between 1670 and 1857. Vickery, *The Gentleman's Daughter: Women's Lives in Georgian England* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1998), 73.

¹³ Edward and Elizabeth Manning sent a request for divorce to the Lords of Trade and Plantations in 1739. “Mr. Fane's report to the Lords of Trade and Plantations, on an act passed in Jamaica...to dissolve the marriage of Edward Manning Esq. with Elizabeth Moore,” May 12, 1739, CO 137/23, f. 60, NAE.

¹⁴ The King in Council observed that this was the “first instance of an act of divorce” that had ever passed in the American colonies. However, they did not believe that adultery was positively proven and the act was repealed and disallowed. 1741, CO 137/23, f. 130, NAE.

¹⁵ Pearsall, “The Late Flagrant Instance of Depravity in My Family,” 549-582.

even marriage could be a permeable relationship, affording women with a degree of sexual autonomy in certain cases.

Remaining Single

Single women enjoyed greater legal, financial, and sexual independence than those who were married in the early eighteenth century. In Daniel Defoe's novel *Roxana: The Fortunate Mistress*, published in 1724, the main character, a fallen widow, asserts that "a Woman was as fit to govern and enjoy her own Estate, without a Man, as a Man was." Unlike a married woman who fell under coverture, relinquishing her right to "govern" her estate, Roxana maintained full authority over her property. Gender-based restrictions could only be imposed on married women. Not only did a single woman possess the freedom to enjoy her property "without a man," she also held the right to her person: "while she was thus single, she was her own." A single woman's claim to subjectivity included the liberty to "gratify herself." The novel explicitly tied freedom to sexual autonomy: as Roxana reasoned, "she might entertain a Man, as a Man does a Mistress."¹⁶ It was unfair to hold unmarried women to a sexual double standard that equated femininity with chastity, while allowing men to "entertain" lovers. In essence, the novel proposed that, while a woman remained single, gender distinctions were reduced. She could act in the same legal, economic, and sexual capacities as a man. Sexual liberty became a defining feature of gender equality: it was as important as the right to property. Indeed, personal liberty was constituted, in part, by sexual freedom.

Defoe's novel draws attention to the vexed and ambiguous position of single women, widows and spinsters in the early eighteenth century. Wealthy widows like

¹⁶ Daniel Defoe, *Roxana; The Fortunate Mistress* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1996), 149.

Defoe's Roxana were traditionally viewed as deeply unsettling figures. Gender conventions defined a man's reputation on his honor, while a woman's emanated from her sexual virtue. The marital relationship acted as the safeguard of her virtue.¹⁷ Single women operated outside of the bounds of that safeguard. By holding the legal and economic rights that were otherwise exclusive to men, they straddled the liminal space between the masculine and feminine.¹⁸ Symbolically, single women contradicted the religiously sanctioned and "natural" ordering of society. Their ungoverned sexuality, especially if the women were young and wealthy, could be viewed as threatening and disruptive to patriarchal social order.¹⁹ In New England, for instance, the ambiguous status of widows sparked disputes in print culture, with some authors urging them to remain single and others recommending remarriage, fearing their unfettered social and sexual independence.²⁰ Certain British communities established ordinances that blurred the line between women who never married and prostitutes.²¹

Jamaican society lacked the powerful religious undercurrent that infused New England life or the institutional structures of Britain to enforce strong moral and ethical codes. Within the island's context, single women were considered to be less threatening. Jamaica's intensive investment in slavery during the first decades of the eighteenth century made freedom and wealth more important markers of status than sexual

¹⁷ According to Karin Wulf, single women were a "nexus for cultural tensions and thus provide a prism through which vital connections among politics, economics, and gender were refracted." *Not All Wives*, 5, 9.

¹⁸ Vivian Bruce Conger describes the ambiguous place of widows in colonial Massachusetts, South Carolina and Maryland: "they did not fit comfortably into a well-ordered hierarchical society or into any well-defined niche; they could not be easily constrained by the boundaries that framed the lives of other Anglo-American women." *The Widows' Might: Widowhood and Gender in Early British America* (New York: New York University Press, 2009), 26.

¹⁹ In *ibid.*: "Their assets made wealthy, fecund and winsome widows potentially powerful and dangerous." 46.

²⁰ *Ibid.*, 36, 46.

²¹ Froide, *Never Married*, 21.

reputation. The generalized apathy toward notions of sexual propriety further disentangled sexual reputation from social standing. As a result, free women of European descent, in particular, did not necessarily need to marry in order to safeguard their social standing. Marital status was also tied to race during the first half of the eighteenth century. Most of the women identified as being widows or spinsters in official records, such as wills and court cases, were also assumed to be white. Free women of color were more likely to be labeled by their racial identities as “free mulatto” or “free negro”—not their marital status. They were excluded from marriage and denied its supports and benefits. While interracial marriage was not illegal in Jamaica, as it was elsewhere, social custom thwarted most interracial couples from legally marrying. The broad spectrum of nonmarital relationships pursued by free women of European and African descent—which ranged from casual sex to romantic friendships and long-term partnerships—clarifies how and when emerging racial categories shaped women’s social, legal, and economic power. Women from across the race and class spectrum faced few repercussions for engaging in sexual and romantic encounters outside of wedlock.

The prominence of single women in a colony where officials were actively trying to recruit marriageable women is, at first glance, puzzling. Various factors led to a woman’s determining to remain single—after the death of a spouse, for example—or forgoing marriage altogether. First, high mortality rates meant that marriages typically lasted for several years, not a lifetime. For free women, then, marriage was a temporary status: many brides, if not all, would spend part of their adult lives as widows. Others deferred from marrying altogether and remained spinsters. This was not a uniquely colonial phenomenon. Although less severe mortality rates prevailed in Europe, they

were still high. Even so, most widows did not remarry during the early modern period. Only twenty percent of French widows and twenty-five percent of English widows remarried. Remarriage rates were generally even lower for widows in America: the portion of women who remarried in the colonies dropped from eleven percent in the seventeenth century to five and a half percent in the eighteenth century.²²

In Jamaica, poverty would have prevented poorer women from attracting spouses. Marriage to an impoverished widow with several children to feed was not an attractive prospect. Destitute widows were objects of charity, and other widows were particularly sensitive to their plight. After the turn of the eighteenth century Elizabeth Doddington, for instance, gave the “poor widows & orphans” who had survived Port Royal's earthquake and subsequent fire all of her land there to use for their “sustenance & maintenance.”²³ Two decades later, the widow Ann Hansis, who was by no means wealthy, similarly left forty shillings apiece for six poor widows in her parish of St. Catherine.²⁴

While women of European descent constituted an important sector of the island's free population, they were still outnumbered by free men, especially in more rural areas. The unevenness of gender ratios would suggest that marriageable women were sought after, especially if they were wealthy. Furthermore, higher mortality rates freed women to remarry with greater frequency. They could even amass fortunes by outliving several husbands—a practice Governor Nicholas Lawes described as “marry and bury.”²⁵ Indeed, in his characterization of seventeenth-century Virginia as “widowarchy,” Edmund

²² Conger, *Widows' Might*, 43-44.

²³ Will of Elizabeth Doddington, 1703, vol. 10, IRO.

²⁴ Will of Ann Hansis, 1720, vol. 16, IRO.

²⁵ Phrase quoted by Edward Long, *The History of Jamaica*, vol. 3 (London: 1774), 285.

Morgan has argued that marriage became a “principal means for the concentration of wealth” in the colony.²⁶ During the first half of the eighteenth century, the affluent West Indian widow became a familiar figure in fact and fiction. They were desirable targets for opportunistic men who sought to acquire fortunes through marriage. Scottish merchants traveled to Jamaica in the eighteenth century, Alan Karras tells us, with the express purpose of marrying wealthy widows, bypassing “the standard way” to earn fortunes “by attention to business.”²⁷

Men did, indeed, acquire fortunes by wedding wealthy Jamaican widows. Sir Hans Sloane, a pioneer in natural history, member of the Royal Society and founder of the British Museum, for instance, followed this trajectory. Sloane travelled to Jamaica as the Duke of Albemarle’s personal physician at the end of the seventeenth century. While in the colony he befriended local physician, Fulke Rose, who made a fortune importing slaves to the colony and cultivating sugar.²⁸ Sloane also became acquainted with Rose’s wife, Elizabeth. When Rose died, he left Elizabeth a handsome inheritance and full legal control of his estate.²⁹ Sloane married Elizabeth soon after Rose’s death, and assumed authority over the Rose family fortune. Thus, a wealthy widow from Jamaica provided the capital that funded Sloane’s intellectual pursuits in Britain.

Fortune-hunting men also appear in fictional accounts of island life. The Jamaican-born author John Kelly portrays these men as mercenary agents who resemble pirates in their motives to “plunder” and “ruin” in his 1737 play “The Islanders, or the

²⁶ Morgan, *American Slavery, American Freedom*, 166.

²⁷ Alan Karras, *Sojourners in the Sun: Scottish Migrants in Jamaica and the Chesapeake, 1740-1800* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1993), 158.

²⁸ James Delbourgo, “Slavery in the Cabinet of Curiosities: Hans Sloane’s Atlantic World,” *British Museum*, 2007, http://www.britishmuseum.org/research/news/hans_sloanes_atlantic_world.aspx.

²⁹ Fulke Rose left his wife Elizabeth one third of the family estate for life and £2,000, in addition to the plate, jewels and furniture. Will of Fulke Rose, June 17, 1691, Abstracts of Jamaica Wills, 1625–1792, Add. Mss., 34,181, BL.

Mad Orphan.” Set in Jamaica, the play portrays courtship as a high-stakes game for women, who stand to lose everything upon marrying the wrong man. Suitors who travel to the island with the express purpose of marrying into wealth—to “plunder the Widdow, and ruin the Orphan”—are merely following the “laudable Custom of the Country.”³⁰ In Kelly’s work, the wealthy widow must be vigilant against such advances. As one character observes, “a rich widdow is as much gap'd after; as the guardianship of a good sugar work”; here he explicitly equates women with property. The line draws attention to women’s status as the property of their husbands under coverture: the marital custom that imposed serious restrictions on women’s legal, economic, and sexual autonomy. In contrast, single women possessed the same legal rights to their estates as men.

Free women who, on average, possessed greater wealth than women elsewhere in the empire, did not need to marry for financial support. The more money a woman had, the less attractive marriage might be to her. Widowhood, in particular “gave a woman power, a legal identity, and independence.”³¹ Unlike spinsters, widows garnered social respect for having once been married, and most gained at the husband’s death an independent income.³² Accordingly, almost three-quarters of the 741 women who made wills between 1665-1757, or the 1,188 women whose estates were probated between 1670-1784, were identified as “widows.”³³ These numbers are not surprising, given that married women did not have the legal right to make wills or hold family estates held under their names. Yet, they also draw attention to the crucial legal authority a widow

³⁰ John D. Kelly, “The Islanders, or Mad Orphan,” 1737, p. 8, King’s 301, BL.

³¹ Richard Grassby, *Kinship and Capitalism: Marriage, Family, and Business in the English Speaking World, 1580-1740* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2001), 150.

³² Vickery observes: the “spinster and the wife were divided by a chasm of status. Upon marriage a woman renounced her legal personality in common law...but acquired significant social credit in compensation....A wife had a prominent position in the fundamental institution of society, the male-headed household family.” *Behind Closed Doors*, 193.

³³ Jamaica Wills, 1665 to 1757, vols. 1 to 31, IRO; Jamaica Inventories, 1674-1784, JA.

commanded in contrast with a wife, and this authority probably lay at the heart of many a woman's preference for remaining single. Widows and spinsters who managed businesses, disciplined servants and slaves, and provided for children on their own may have viewed the prospect of coverture unfavorably.

Husbands also deterred wives from remarrying by adding punitive clauses to their wills. Some, like Rector John Venn, merely issued warnings, claiming that his wife was “under no restraint” to remarry, “but he earnestly advises her as a Friend never to marry again - if she does (on the prophetic words of a Man near his End; she will be very unhappy.)”³⁴ Other men gave wives larger legacies than they were entitled to, with the proviso that remarriage would trigger their reduction. Mariner Daniel Cornelius left his houses and slaves to his wife during her widowhood, but ordered that “in case my wife do marry again...she shall have only her third part.”³⁵ Tavern keeper Thomas Webb gave his wife, Florence, all of his property for life, but reduced it the customary “third” if she remarried.³⁶ Daniel Lopez Laguna provided his wife with a plot of land and a house “rent free,” stipulating if she remarried, “I leave her no house or anything.”³⁷ Most men attached restrictions to wives' legacies as protective measures to keep family estates intact and to shield children from pernicious stepfathers. They, like their wives, were aware that remarriage placed women under coverture again, entitling new husbands to anything they inherited.

Men worried that new husbands would not have the best interest of their families at heart. Planter John Curle made his wife sole executrix, giving her five acres of land,

³⁴ Will of John Venn, Rector, December 29, 1763, “Abstracts of Jamaica Wills, 1625–1792,” Add. Mss., 34,181, BL.

³⁵ Will of Daniel Cornelius, 1710, vol. 13, IRO.

³⁶ Will of Thomas Webb, 1730, vol. 18, IRO.

³⁷ Will of Daniel Lopez Laguna, 1722, vol. 16, IRO.

along with use of his estate during her lifetime. If she had a “desire” to remarry, Curle required the new husband to agree to a marriage settlement and offer “good and sufficient security” that his estate would not be “wasted or embezzled.” Curle was clearly concerned with protecting his estate from grasping new husbands. He was also concerned for the fate of his children, and his will offers one example of how widows risked losing the legal guardianship of children if they remarried. If Curle’s wife remarried, he required her to give up the guardianship of their son.³⁸ Similarly, John Harding gave his wife Sarah two enslaved girls, a horse and saddle and a £37 annuity; but should she “intermarry” she “was to have nothing to do with the estate nor to have care of my children any longer till they are fit to be put to school either here or in England.”³⁹ The conditions placed on wives’ legacies by husbands made remarriage impractical, if not distressing, for women who stood to lose ownership of property and care of their children. As widows, mothers could maintain legal guardianship of children, engage freely in the marketplace, and enjoy the full financial benefits of the legacies they received.

Single Women’s Sexual Autonomy

In addition to legal and economic authority, single women also commanded sexual autonomy. During the first half of the early eighteenth century, women from all levels of the social spectrum engaged in nonmarital sex. While they were by no means “sexually liberated” in a modern sense, single women’s activities suggest a greater degree of sexual independence than existed in many British communities or in certain regions of mainland America. Widows and spinsters pursued short-lived sexual encounters, and they

³⁸ Will of John Curle, 1710, vol. 13, IRO.

³⁹ Will of John Harding, 1740, vol. 22, IRO.

formed ambiguous intimate friendships with single men and with other women. They entered into long-term partnerships and raised families outside of formal marriage. Cultural restrictions against marriages that crossed racial boundaries made nonmarital relationships particularly significant for free women of African descent. Partnerships with free people could yield financial security and legal protection, and promise better opportunities for the children born of interracial unions.

While women's nonmarital sexual activities were not treated as crimes, cultural taboos prevented them from acknowledging sexual escapades out of wedlock as openly as men did. Sexual propriety still mattered to the construction of respectable womanhood; it just mattered less. Yet, women's oblique references to male "friends" or "beloved friends" to whom they gave substantial bequests, are suggestive of emotional intimacy at the very least. Cross-gender friendships also show how the nature of friendship itself was changing during the first half of the eighteenth century. The practices of sociability and the availability of new leisure activities, from tea drinking to theater going, gained popularity and encouraged people to socialize in mixed company. Toward the middle of the century, friendships between married men and women were socially acceptable in colonial North America.⁴⁰ Friendships between unmarried adults that crossed gender boundaries, however, were less common. When money was involved, such companionships could become suspect on the island. A case brought to Chancery Court against the appropriately named Redmond Barry demonstrates how the nebulous

⁴⁰ Cassandra Good, "Friendly Relations: Situating Friendships Between Men and Women in the Early American Republic, 1780–1830," *Gender & History* 24, no.1 (2012): 18–34; See also Richard Godbeer, *The Overflowing of Friendship: Love between Men and the Creation of the American Republic* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2009).

friendship between a widow and single men could be viewed as disruptive.⁴¹ Barry's "friendship" with the widow Jane Fitzgerald sparked an inheritance dispute when her other heirs believed that Barry, who had been nominated as executor of the widow's estate, had overstepped the bounds of his role as "friend." According to the widow's sister, her claim to the estate surpassed Barry's: he was, after all, just a male friend.⁴²

The nature of Fitzgerald's friendship with the younger man was the focal point of the case. Witnesses were asked if the widow ever told them she owed a "great obligation" to Barry and whether she planned to make her will in "his favor" because "he *deserved her friendship* beyond any other person." Clearly, Barry had earned a place of esteem and affection in Jane Fitzgerald's life. One witness claimed that she acknowledged her debt to Barry, whom she called "cousin" on account of his kindness to her late husband Captain Fitzgerald and herself. Fitzgerald once exclaimed that Barry was "the only friend she had in Jamaica." Another person told the court that Fitzgerald called Barry her nephew. By calling him cousin or nephew, she indicated that he had become a surrogate family member. Furthermore, by naming Barry as her executor, Fitzgerald signaled her trust in him. Ultimately, the court agreed that the widow never intended to leave her entire estate to a younger single male friend who could not prove his connection to her through blood or marriage. Friendship, especially between an older woman and a younger man, carried less weight.

Other single women took additional steps to ensure that male friends would be recognized as important emotional and possibly intimate companions. Intriguingly, ten

⁴¹ It is a coincidence of history that the Redmond Barry of Jamaica bore striking similarities with the eighteenth-century Anglo-Irish lady's man and fortune hunter that William Thackeray based his fictional character on in *The Luck of Barry Lyndon* (1844).

⁴² Abigail Baillie v. Redmond Barry, August 27, 1739, Chancery Court Records, 1738 to 1744, vol. 10, JA.

percent of all women who made wills between 1665 and 1757 gave their entire estates to unmarried men who were not relatives. The characteristics of women's wills indicate that men's roles in their lives, though unclear, may have exceeded the bounds of friendship at times. Certain women devised their entire estates to male "friends": most also named the men as sole executors. This role was usually delegated to a spouse, parent, sibling, or child, not to a friend. Furthermore, such sizeable bequests were normally given to spouses and children.

Some women who gave estates to single men claimed to do so because they had no other relations or friends in the colony. For example, "spinster" Margaret Gylbart—who travelled from Devon, England to Jamaica alone—gave her entire estate to her "beloved friend" John Coll, who worked aboard the ship that carried her to the colony. Gylbart described her gift to Coll as a form of repayment "in consideration of the great care he hath taken of me and the expense he hath been at concerning me since my arrival on this island of Jamaica particularly since the beginning of my recent sickness." Gylbart also made him the sole executor of her estate.⁴³ Gylbart, a single woman who travelled thousands of miles to a foreign colony, turned to a male shipmate for support. Whether Gylbart and Coll became lovers during the voyage is unknowable. She did, however, lavish emotional and financial attention upon Gylbart, who had acted as her caretaker when she fell ill. She made no references to other friends or relatives in her will. Similarly, another spinster named Sarah Barnwell left her land title and thirteen slaves to a merchant in return for the "many favors" she had received from him rather than a family member.⁴⁴ Other women's bequests to male friends were less vague. Mary Bonner

⁴³ Will of Margaret Gylbart, 1745, vol. 25, IRO.

⁴⁴ Will of Sarah Barnwell, 1754, vol. 29, IRO.

identified a man named Edward Bolt as her “consort,” which implied that she thought of him as a romantic partner. Bonner owned the property that she and Bolt lived in together, and where Bolt worked as a shopkeeper. She gave him “full liberty of the room he lives in and shope to work *as in my lifetime*” in her will.⁴⁵

The bequests made by women to male friends bore a greater resemblance to the legacies that husbands gave to wives than the offerings made by women to female friends. Women normally gave personal property such as clothing, items of jewelry, or bed linens to other women as tokens of friendship, and reserved real estate and slaves for children or grandchildren. Within this general pattern, it was unusual for unmarried women to bequeath land and slaves to male “friends.” Mary Reeves, for example, gave her “truly beloved friend,” Dr. Thomas Goldingham, her entire estate and made him her sole executor.⁴⁶ Another “gentleman” inherited all of the “goods slaves and real estate” owned by widow Anne Miler to enjoy during his lifetime.⁴⁷ Widow Eleanor Walters bequeathed her estate—an enslaved boy named Fortune, and a horse and saddle—to her “beloved friend” and executor, surgeon George Hall.⁴⁸ Elizabeth Wilks gave Charles Possod a plantation called “Healthful Hill” and four slaves.⁴⁹ The distinctive nature of the legacies made to single men who were not relatives points to the existence of cross-gender friendships characterized by lasting emotional and possibly romantic ties.

Valentine Mumbee’s erudite explanation of his relationship with Elizabeth Warden in 1740 offers insight into the nature of lifelong nonmarital partnerships. Mumbee and Warden treated each other as surrogate spouses and had children together,

⁴⁵ Will of Mary Bonner, 1750, vol. 28, IRO.

⁴⁶ Will of Mary Reeves, 1684, vol. 3-5, IRO.

⁴⁷ Will of Anne Miler, 1748, vol. 26, IRO.

⁴⁸ Will of Eleanor Walters, 1719, vol. 15, IRO.

⁴⁹ Will of Elizabeth Wilks, 1737, vol. 21, IRO.

and Mumbee described his partner as the woman “I have for some time laid as with a Wife.” Writing his will, Mumbee defined the “essence of Matrimony” as “a union of minds & mental fidelity & not in the external ceremonies & public forums,” and he considered official marriage to be the “legal forms & means of redress to the weak and injured.”⁵⁰ He and Warden shared an intellectual connection, and they were able to “govern themselves by divine precept moral honesty & social justice” without the imposition of the law. Supposedly, living outside of wedlock “freed” them from “the restriction of legal bonds & coercive penalties” that marriage entailed. While Mumbee could not hold Warden to the strictures of coverture, he could dictate the terms of the bequest she received from her companion. She would receive a £107 annuity, the use of his house and chariots, and legal guardianship of their children because she had “not deviated from those essential points that constitute a marriage.” Mumbee maintained full legal control over his own estate because they were not married, yet he treated Warden as his wife, reducing her annuity to £28 and having their children “taken from her” if she remarried.

Only Mumbee’s portrayal of the relationship has survived, not Warden’s. These documents, however, sheds light on why single women, especially those of middling and elite status, often formed friendships with men of lower economic and social standing. Single women who engaged in intimate partnerships with wealthy men could exert less authority in the relationship, as Warden did. Wealthy widows and spinsters, however, outranked tradesmen and artisans in colonial society, regardless of gender. Certain women provided significant legacies to men who worked as blacksmiths, bricklayers,

⁵⁰ Will of Valentine Mumbee, November 14, 1741, “Abstracts of Jamaica Wills, 1625–1792,” Add. Mss., 34,181, BL.

carpenters, and coopers. Widow Margaret Wade left her entire estate to a mariner named James Miller, and widow Anne Cookes bequeathed her estate to her “loving friend” William Speed, a tailor in Kingston.⁵¹ Widow Mary Bazill bestowed her fortune upon a tavern keeper.⁵² Elizabeth Smith, who identified herself as a “singlewoman,” gave her real and personal estate to a barber.⁵³ Widow Mary Adams gave her “very good friend [the cooper] Samuel Adams,” 300 acres of land, a lot in Kingston, two slaves, and furniture for one chamber. She also allowed him to live in and “personally enjoy possession of my dwelling house” after she died.⁵⁴ Though Mary and Samuel shared the same surname, Mary identified him as a “very good friend,” not a spouse or relative. Friendships between elite and middling single women and tradesmen or artisans, whether platonic or sexual, suggest that gender and status boundaries were porous. All free people intermingled and socialized, helping to solidify their interest in controlling the considerably larger and potentially threatening enslaved population.

The reasons that led single women to devise entire estates to male friends, especially those who were of lower social standing, are less obvious. Widows who had married in the past for strategic reasons, either to form family alliances or acquire fortunes, may have been inclined to form a range of friendships with men whose social standings made them less threatening. Women who inherited fortunes from deceased spouses did not have a financial imperative to remarry: they could support themselves. Under these circumstances, would it be sensible for such a woman to enjoy relations with a man who was unlikely marriage material? When a woman remarried, her control over

⁵¹ Will of Mary Wade, 1716, vol. 15, IRO; Will of Ann Cookes, 1751, vol. 28, IRO.

⁵² Will of Mary Bazill, 1727, vol. 17, IRO.

⁵³ Will of Elizabeth Smith, 1712, vol. 14, IRO.

⁵⁴ Will of Mary Adams, 1737, vol. 21, IRO.

her fortune, and even her children, were uncertain. Maintaining a “friendship” with a man was a practical strategy for a woman who wanted to protect her legal right to property, especially if her inheritance was saddled with restrictions regarding remarriage. Women who remained single also held on to the right to bequeath their estates as they chose. Widows and spinsters pursued a range of friendships that crossed gender and social status lines. While we cannot know the specific nature of these friendships, women’s bequests reveal how important friendships could be. Close friends acted as trusted companions and even surrogate spouses, reducing the need for free women to marry in order to enjoy emotional and sexual intimacy.

Free women of European descent were far less likely to acknowledge “friendships” with men of African descent. In the seventeenth century—before chattel slavery came to dominate the social landscape and indentured servants labored alongside enslaved Africans—white women and black men openly pursued relationships in places like Virginia and Barbados.⁵⁵ Britain’s investment in the African slave trade propelled the rapid growth of slave populations, making slave revolt a serious threat. From the middle of the seventeenth century onward, colonies began to pass laws punishing interracial sex. In 1644, Antigua passed a law fining free white men and women and extending the terms of indenture for white servants who had sexual encounters with black people.⁵⁶ Virginia followed suit, promulgating a law in 1662 that increased the fines for “Christians” who committed the crime of “fornication” with a “negro man or woman.” Almost thirty years later, it passed a new statute forbidding interracial marriage that targeted white women

⁵⁵ Godbeer, *Sexual Revolution in Early America*, 202; Dunn, *Sugar and Slaves*, 253.

⁵⁶ Bush, “White ‘Ladies,’ Coloured ‘Favourites’ and Black ‘Wenches,’” 248.

specifically. Similar laws were passed in Maryland.⁵⁷ South Carolina sought to deter interracial sex between white women and black men in 1717, adding seven years to the term of any white woman who bore a black man's child, and forcing interracial parents into seven years of servitude. White men were supposedly subjected to the same punishments, but they were rarely brought to court for illicit sex: the laws primarily targeted white women.⁵⁸ Less than a decade later, Pennsylvania outlawed interracial sexual relations in 1726. The child born to a white woman and fathered by a "negro or mulatto" could be bound out until the age of thirty-one, and even if both partners were free, their offspring would be held in a slave-like status.⁵⁹

The racial and gender dimensions of Jamaica's sexual culture evolved within this Anglo-Atlantic context, in a world marked by the rapid growth of chattel slavery. By the 1690s, the Jamaica slave population comprised a significant majority of the island's total. Yet, unlike most other American legislatures, the Jamaica Assembly never sought to pass anti-miscegenation laws. The island more closely resembled other Caribbean colonies and South Carolina in its treatment of interracial sex.⁶⁰ Though no laws existed to prevent white women from crossing racial boundaries, they seemed to refrain from publically acknowledging interracial sex. During the first half of the eighteenth century, it was socially acceptable for white men to have free and enslaved black lovers and father multiracial children, yet the records are strikingly silent about white women. Most likely, this silence implies that interracial relationships, while not illegal, were also not socially acceptable. When it came to informally enforcing racial boundaries in the colony, a

⁵⁷ Godbeer, *Sexual Revolution in Early America*, 202-203.

⁵⁸ Ibid., 208-209.

⁵⁹ Lyons, *Sex Among the Rabble*, 91.

⁶⁰ For a comparison of sexuality in Virginia and South Carolina, see Godbeer, *Sexual Revolution in Early America*, 190-207.

woman's race and her gender could determine to a degree her sexual behavior. The longstanding sexual double standard, which allowed men greater sexual liberty than women, was mapped onto an emerging racial caste system that placed limits on white women's sexual autonomy.

Curtailing white women's behavior, or at least their ability to be open about their behavior, was a means of supporting the ideological and legal construction of slavery. Sexual and romantic partnerships between free white women and enslaved men threatened the slave system in ways that white men's relationships with enslaved women did not. The former relationship was paradoxical on two levels: a white woman who exerted sexual power over an enslaved man inverted normative gender roles; an enslaved man who extended masculine power over a free woman contradicted his social and legal position as a slave.⁶¹ If the couple had children, the legal status of their offspring would be more ambiguous than the status of children born to a free man and an enslaved woman. Slavery was heritable along the matrilineal line, and all children born to enslaved women were legally considered slaves at birth. In this respect, Jamaican lawmakers followed precedents established in Virginia and Barbados defining slavery as a heritable status, which followed the mother's condition.⁶² Jamaican law further encouraged free men to sexually exploit enslaved women by erasing any responsibility they might have for the children born of such encounters. Men could even increase their own slaveholdings by fathering children with their slaves. The status of children fathered by enslaved men and born to free women, on the other hand, was more confused. Would they be defined as

⁶¹ Bush identifies white women's right to punish enslaved men as an inversion of power. "White 'Ladies,' Coloured 'Favourites' and Black 'Wenches,'" 246.

⁶² Kathleen Brown discusses the consequences of tax laws and legal codes that defined the children of enslaved women as slaves, thus making slavery heritable, in seventeenth-century Virginia. *Good Wives, Nasty Wenches, and Anxious Patriarchs*, 132-135.

free like their mothers, or as slaves like their fathers? Relations between free women and enslaved men exposed the legally and socially constructed—and, in turn, unstable—natures of slavery *and* gender.

However, free women's reticence to disclose interracial sex should not be interpreted as evidence of practice. As Kamau Brathwaite concluded of Jamaica, "There were perhaps more black male/white female illicit sexual contact than...the stereotype of the situation indicates."⁶³ Fragmentary evidence supports Brathwaite's hypothesis. In 1749, for example, Sarah Hart gave her entire estate to her two mixed-race grandsons William and John Darby, the children of her daughter, who had married a free black man named John Darby.⁶⁴ That daughter was not unique. In a 1730 court case involving the abuse of an adolescent girl Sarah Jennings, her stepfather was overheard saying to Sarah: "dam her he would whip her for she had got a foul distemper by laying with a negro."⁶⁵ Regardless of whether Sarah actually had sex with a black man, the reference suggests that interracial sex was commonplace in Kingston. Sarah's stepfather, who worked on the docks, would have been intimately familiar with seaport's growing community of free multiracial and African individuals. Sarah and the large number of free white women who lived close to the harbor were likely to interact with the ethnically and racially diverse group of dockworkers and mariners who passed through the port. Furthermore, Sarah's stepfather did not punish her for her sexual activity, or even necessarily for crossing racial lines: he was furious with her for catching a "distemper," to wit a venereal disease, claiming "it had cost him a great deal of money for the curing of her." Ultimately,

⁶³ Brathwaite, *Development of Creole Society in Jamaica*, 188-190.

⁶⁴ Will of Sarah Hart, 1749, vol. 27, IRO.

⁶⁵ Commission, from King to John Wyllys Esq, June 29, 1730, vol. 18, IRO.

it was the cost of Sarah's actions, the man suggested, not the actions themselves that enraged him.

Other evidence shows that free white women also engaged in sexual relationships with enslaved men. An anonymous slave, the child of multiracial parents, sent an extraordinary petition to the Bishop of London in 1723 as a means of drawing attention to the plight of slaves on the island. Describing themselves as “molatters” who “are baptised and brought up in the way of the Christian faith”—“sum of them has white fathers and sum white mothers”—the petitioners testified to white women having children with enslaved men. The writer exposed how the slave system twisted familial relationships, creating households where “one brother is a Slave to another and one Sister to another,” and intimating that “for mee my selfe I am my brother's Slave but my name is Secrett.” The children of interracial unions were kept in “Cruell Bondegg” as slaves forever, ignorant of Christianity and denied matrimony, and the petitioners begged the Bishop to grant them permission to send their children to school learn to “Reed through the Bybell.” The author ended with an apology for the poor writing, observing that he/she was “butt a poor Slave that writt itt.” The petitioners would not “dare” to identify themselves in the letter, for “feare of our masters for if they knew that wee have Sent home to your honour wee Should goo neare to Swing upon the gallass tree.”⁶⁶ They would face hanging if their disclosure was discovered.

This anonymous letter is remarkable on many accounts. It is one of the few letters in existence written by enslaved people during the early eighteenth century. The letter provides rare insight into how slaves perceived the experience of slavery. It shows slaves being baptized and raised as Christians and taught to read and write. The letter also

⁶⁶ Anon. to the Bishop of London, August 4, 1723, Fulham Papers, vol. 17, ff. 167-168, LPL.

reveals how common it had become for free families to include enslaved members, and for free colonists to hold their own children and siblings in bondage. Free white women were intimately involved in creating families comprised of children born out of wedlock; some of these children, in turn, were the offspring of relationships that crossed the boundaries of race and slavery.

“Natural Born” Children

Women’s eagerness about nonmarital partnerships when making bequests had more to do with issues surrounding the transmission of property than with lived practice. The very high illegitimacy rates among free women of European and African descent show that intimacy outside of wedlock was prevalent and socially accepted. Free women were not punished for fornication or bastard bearing, as they might have been elsewhere. The absence of consequences for nonmarital sex further reduced the social and legal pressure on single women to marry as a means of safeguarding their sexual reputations. Children born to unwed mothers were accepted into free society, making the stigma of illegitimacy less of a deterrent. Colonists preferred the term “natural,” instead of more disparaging descriptors like “base born” or “bastard,” to identify children born out of wedlock. The island diverged from metropolitan norms in its lax handling of free women who started families outside of the bounds of legitimate marriage. In early modern Britain, women who had illegitimate children posed an ideological threat to the patriarchal household, and a financial threat to burdened parishes that had to provide economic support for bastards. Unwed mothers were banished from communities or sent to houses of correction. In fact, the majority of prisoners in Britain’s houses of correction were

single women who committed petty crimes, including prostitution and bastard bearing.⁶⁷

The growth of the empire in the eighteenth century required larger numbers of men to protect British interests abroad, to man ships, and to engage in trade, leaving women behind who turned to prostitution to support themselves and bore illegitimate children at higher rates.⁶⁸ “While the nation needed to produce children to perform its labor and populate the empire,” Felicity Nussbaum observes, “it rendered itself virtually helpless when confronted with the inequities endured by women engaged in reproductive *and* productive labor.”⁶⁹

The expansion of the empire also contributed to high illegitimacy rates in Jamaica. Colonial men were involved in a range of seafaring and military activities, which resulted in prolonged absence from the island. Yet, islanders displayed little interest in social reforms targeting prostitutes and unwed mothers.⁷⁰ If women were punished for prostitution, fornication, or bastardy, the records have not survived. Ecclesiastical courts, which traditionally handled moral crimes, were never established in Jamaica.

Workhouses were used to discipline slaves, not unwed mothers and prostitutes. Women did not pay a high price for sexual independence, as they might have elsewhere. Instead, starting in the late seventeenth-century, islanders developed a sexual culture that would come to characterize mainland cities like Philadelphia later in the eighteenth century.

While illegitimacy rates in Philadelphia never grew as high as Jamaica’s, the City of

⁶⁷ The houses of correction were designed to discipline crimes associated with single women: prostitution, petty larceny, living out of service, and bastard bearing. Froide, *Never Married*, 38, 40-41.

⁶⁸ Nussbaum refers to M. Dorothy George’s labeling of the period of 1720-1750 as a period of “waste of life” in London “because of the high burial rate, high infant mortality rate, the inebriated lower class, and the pauperization of women.” *Torrid Zones*, 26.

⁶⁹ *Ibid.*, 29.

⁷⁰ The Grand Court tried criminal cases for “carnal abuse” and “infanticide” on the island. Other sexual activities defined as crimes elsewhere in the empire, including fornication, bastardy, adultery, sodomy, prostitution, and interracial sex, were not tried by the Grand Court. Only one volume from the eighteenth century has survived and it is considered too fragile to be handled by researchers.

Brotherly Love exhibited a similarly tolerant approach toward nonmarital sexual behavior, from prostitution to bastard bearing.⁷¹ Philadelphia, like Jamaica, was religiously and ethnically diverse, making it difficult to establish a uniform moral code. Punishment of sexual behavior was left to individuals: not the local government.⁷² The similarities shared by Jamaica and Philadelphia shed light on how imperial growth in the eighteenth century, from the tremendous migration of diverse groups to America, the constant circulation of new peoples through port cities, the chronic absence of men, and the rise of slavery resulted in more permissive attitudes toward sex in certain regions in the Atlantic basin.

These changes influenced women's lives in particular. On the one hand, the permissive culture allowed single women to maintain the legal right to their property and the guardianship of their children. They could remain single and also fulfill their emotional and sexual desires. Yet, the lack of regulation also resulted in an absence of institutional support for unwed mothers with children. No parish funds provided for them, nor did local courts pursue fathers to financially care for illegitimate children. Women who started families outside of wedlock assumed responsibility for sustaining their families.

Some women openly acknowledged children born out of wedlock from short-lived sexual encounters. Mary Capell identified herself as a spinster in her 1717 will, indicating she never married. She left her entire estate to her "only son" Charles Capell, who assumed his mother's surname.⁷³ Mary did not identify her son's father, suggesting they did not share an ongoing relationship, or did not wish to reveal it. Similarly, two

⁷¹ Lyons, *Sex Among the Rabble*, 77.

⁷² *Ibid.*, 83.

⁷³ Will of Mary Capell, 1717, vol. 15, IRO.

years before, Widow Anne Sinkkins gave her illegitimate daughter an “Indian boy” slave, an enslaved African girl, and the rest of her estate. James Sinkkins, her illegitimate son, also bore his mother’s surname. Sinkkins expressly acknowledged that “Major James Howard” was the father of Anne and James, but Howard did not bestow his surname on them, nor did Anne offer him anything in her will. Children like Anne and James assumed the surnames of their matrilineal families, either because fathers demurred from recognizing illegitimate offspring or mothers wanted to maintain legal authority over their children.⁷⁴ This practice ran counter to the entrenched British custom of identifying children by the surnames of fathers and constructing patrilineal genealogies. Men traditionally assumed legal control of the guardianship of children, even when they were born out of wedlock. By giving children their surnames, single women may have hoped to enhance their fragile rights as guardians.

In contrast, families consisting of illegitimate children and headed by single women were matrilineal. Grace and Esther Hall, possibly sisters, both bore children out of wedlock and made wills in the 1730s. In her will, Grace identified herself as a spinster; despite this label, Grace had a daughter, Agnes Hall, who adopted Grace’s family’s name and stood to inherit her mother’s entire estate. Esther Hall was a widow who had a “natural” daughter, Johanna White, and a son, George White, with planter Joseph White. Esther gave her estate to her children, but offered her slaves to her lover if the children died.⁷⁵ Small differences in the sisters’ wills reveal the varied nature of single women’s relations outside of marriage. Esther’s children took on their father’s surname. His recognition of them as his own, along with Esther’s bequest to him, suggest that the

⁷⁴ Will of Anne Sinkkins, 1715, vol. 14, IRO.

⁷⁵ Will of Grace Hall, 1735, vol. 19; Will of Esther Hall, vol. 22, IRO.

couple had a longstanding relationship resembling marriage. The father(s) of Grace's children, on the other hand, were never disclosed. The phenomenon was diachronic. Another woman, Grace Hilliard, was also a spinster but bore children with different men; in making her will in 1771, she gave her daughter her surname, while her "natural" son Robert Reid likely took his father's surname.⁷⁶

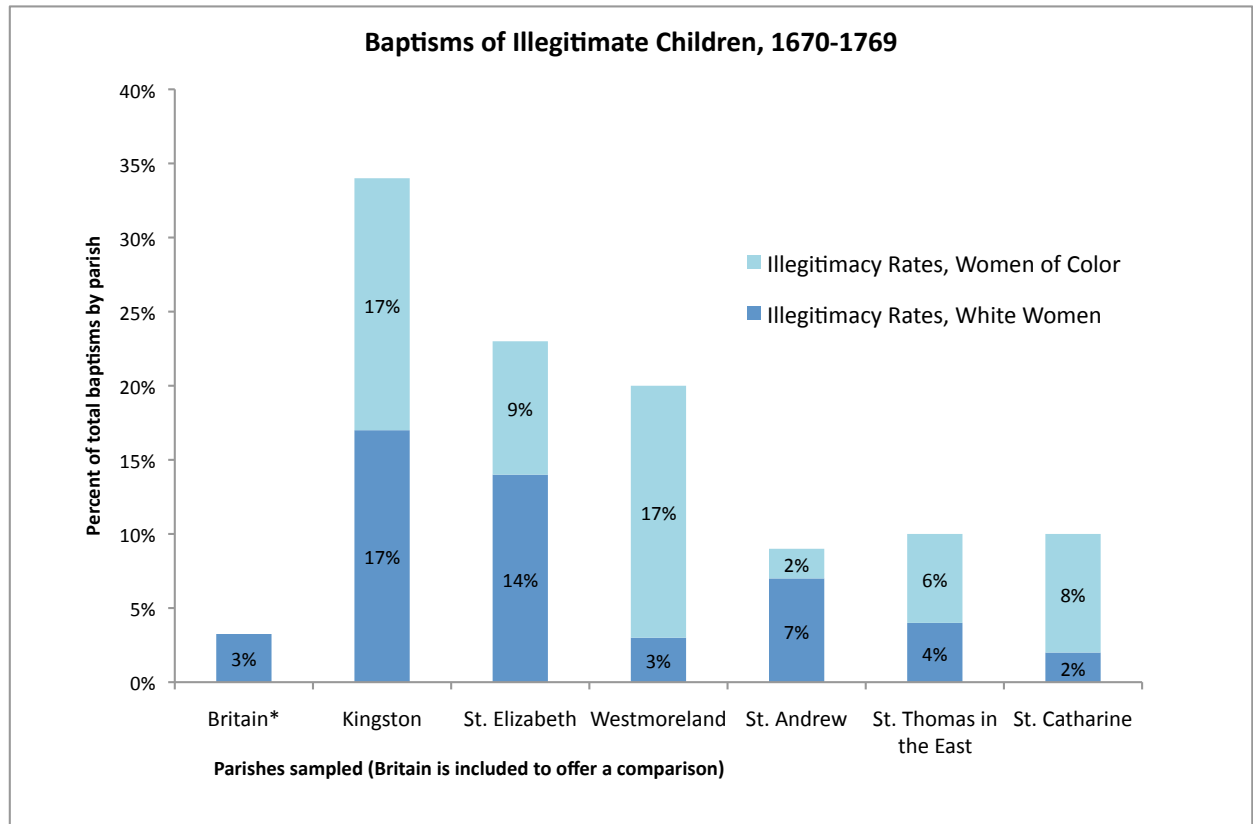


Figure 2.1. Baptisms of Illegitimate Children, 1670-1769.

The naming practices that emerge from baptismal records attest to the pervasiveness, the diversity and the social acceptability of nonmarital relationships. Nearly twenty percent, or two out of every ten children, baptized in six parishes between 1670 and 1769 were illegitimate (Figure 2.1). Furthermore, white women and women of

⁷⁶ Will of Grace Hilliard, 1771, vol. 38, IRO.

color gave birth to illegitimate children at similar rates. In some parishes, unmarried white women bore the most children, while in others women of color held this distinction.⁷⁷ Overall, the exceptionally high illegitimacy rates throughout the island indicate that free women's sexuality was often not directed toward wedlock. Kingston was home to the largest number of children born to unwed parents. Over a third of all children baptized in Kingston between 1722 and 1761 were illegitimate.⁷⁸ Other parishes' illegitimacy rates ranged between nine and twenty-three percent.⁷⁹ The numbers of children born out of wedlock in Jamaica were significantly larger than in Britain, where illegitimacy rates ranged from 0.5 and 5.5 percent.⁸⁰ Indeed, the lowest rate of 8 percent in St. Andrews Parish was still higher than the highest rate in Britain. Furthermore, these figures only account for children who were baptized. They do not include infants who were not baptized, or who died before baptism. Finally, the children born to enslaved women are, for the most part, not represented in baptismal records. Any calculation of illegitimacy would be much higher if it was possible to include all of these children in the totals.

Baptisms sent a number of signals to local community members. Some people appeared in the parish registers as couples though they were not married. Men and women who baptized children together announced their relationship to the public and

⁷⁷ These numbers were derived from a fourteen-year sample of 761 children baptized in Kingston between 1722-1761. Kingston Copy Register, Baptisms, vol. 1, 1722-1792, IRO.

⁷⁸ Trevor Burnard estimates that twenty percent of white children and seventeen percent of children of color baptized in Kingston between 1722 and 1745 were illegitimate. His figures closely match the findings in this chapter. Even so, parish registers were inconsistently maintained documents. Many parishes on the island had frequent turnovers of clergy, and church officials were often erratic record-keepers. As a result, illegitimacy rates may have been even higher. Burnard, "'Gay and Agreeable Ladies': White Women in Mid-Eighteenth-Century Kingston," *Wadabagei: A Journal of the Caribbean and Its Disapora* (2006): 43.

⁷⁹ The largest numbers of illegitimate children were baptized in Kingston. This figure may have been so high because parents from other parishes brought children to be baptized there, it having more churches.

⁸⁰ *Ibid.*, 44.

recorded it in official record ledgers.⁸¹ Those who had more than one child together created surrogate marriages with long-term partners. A white woman named Sarah Robinson, for example, had her son William baptized in 1722 and named John Drinkwater as the father. Two years later, Robinson baptized another son and again listed Drinkwater as the father. Finally, the couple baptized a third son.⁸² Robinson and Drinkwater had an ongoing relationship, though they never married. Most women named the fathers of children at christenings, regardless of whether they maintained ties to the men. Rachael Porter, who was identified as a “free mulatto” in one baptismal record, christened three children born of three different fathers: Abraham Brown, Thomas Whitehead, and Henry Bennett.⁸³ Only her daughter Margaret received her father’s surname.⁸⁴ In the 1720s—when women like Mary Nowell and Johanna Smith refused to name the fathers of their infant daughters—the children possibly resulted from fleeting trysts.⁸⁵

In certain respects, baptism neutralized the differences between single mothers. Church officials defined all infants born to unwed mothers similarly, regardless of the mother’s race or status as free or enslaved. In St. Elizabeth parish, for instance, all children born to unmarried women were labeled as “base born.” However, key distinctions separated free white women, women of color, and—even more so—enslaved women. Wealthier, predominately white women had the financial resources and social capital to decide for themselves whether to remain legally single. More so than gender,

⁸¹ Baptism of Elizabeth Savourett, Baptism of Mary, 1741, Kingston Copy Register, Baptisms, vol. 1, 1722-1792, IRO.

⁸² Baptisms recorded 1722, 1724, 1725, in *ibid.*

⁸³ Baptism of Rebecca, 1729; Baptism of John, 1740; Baptism of Margaret Dallas Whitehead, 1741, in *ibid.*

⁸⁴ Baptism of John Darby, 1750, in *ibid.*

⁸⁵ Baptism of Jane, 1722; Baptism of Johanna, 1725, in *ibid.*

wealth and racial identity enhanced a woman's sexual autonomy. Free women of color were in more precarious positions. Baptisms could take on a different meaning for women like Johanna Sacruse, a "free negro" who bore two daughters with a free and presumably white man, who gave their daughter his paternal surname. Baptism was a way for Johanna to secure Peter's paternity of her children and thereby reinforce their status as free.⁸⁶

Any child born of an enslaved mother was automatically illegitimate and enslaved at birth. Enslaved women had no choice but to be unwed mothers, nor did free men have to support any children they fathered, if the latter were born into slavery. Religion raised another significant barrier to enslaved women who sought to marry enslaved or free men in order to ensure their children's legitimacy. Most slaves of African descent did not convert to Christianity and were considered "heathens" or "infidels" by the Church: their children could not be baptized. Clergymen who attempted to marry and baptize enslaved people encountered widespread resistance from masters, which severely restricted the possibility of slave conversion. Reverend Edward Reading had one plantation owner's permission to convert his slaves. He baptized and married one enslaved couple and taught others to read. Not surprisingly, Reading met with resistance and "ill treatment" from other planters in the area who feared that converting slaves would cause them to "rebel." Reading expressed horror about "the condition of many thousands of poor Souls involv'd in the grossest ignorance exposed to Everlasting misery," which he blamed on the "wickedness" of their owners.⁸⁷

⁸⁶ Baptism of Elizabeth Savourett, baptism of Mary, 1741, in *ibid.*

⁸⁷ Edward Reading to Reverend Henry Maule, February 15, 1723, Fulham Papers, vols. 17 and 18, West Indies, 1661-1739, LPL.

Other church officials concluded much the same; masters were the chief obstacles to converting slaves to Christianity. William May, a minister in Kingston, wrote to the Bishop of London that he and fellow ministers did not “dare” to convert slaves “without the consent of masters which they do not give.”⁸⁸ John Kelly who ran the church in the Parish of St. Elizabeth noted it was “impossible” to convert the “thousands of infidels” because masters made them work six days a week and the “men who are employed to make ym work” were “as bad if not worse than the infidels themselves.”⁸⁹ Enslaved women who engaged in sexual relations with free men could also be barred from the church. One clergymen went so far as to query the Bishop of London when he asked: should “adult persons, who can give an account of the Christian faith, but have lived in a state of concubinage with their masters or others” be baptized?⁹⁰ The answer was clear: no.

Clergymen who sought to baptize adult slaves encountered serious challenges from slave owners. However, baptizing infants born to free men and enslaved women proved more feasible. Baptisms offered enslaved women of African descent a means of publicly establishing the status of children’s fathers as free. A child who had a free father had a greater chance of being manumitted if the mother was enslaved. Recording a father’s status as free at a baptism was critical for children born to enslaved women who held the most tenuous claims to freedom. Parish registers show that fathers attended the christenings of illegitimate and even enslaved children. Nathan Sprigg, a free white man, and his partner Juba, a mulatto woman who “belonged to John Woodcock,” baptized their

⁸⁸ William May, Kingston, 1724, “Answers to Queries,” in *ibid*.

⁸⁹ John Kelly, St. Elizabeth, April 15, 1724, “Answers to Queries,” in *ibid*.

⁹⁰ William May to Bishop Gibson, April 3, 1725, in *ibid*.

sons Thomas and William in 1750, much as Joseph Hunt had christened his son James—who he had with an enslaved woman—two decades earlier.⁹¹

Free fathers played significant roles in determining the fates of children born to enslaved women. Some men sought to establish their paternity at baptism by giving the children they had with enslaved women their forenames or surnames. James Collier, for example, christened his son—born to one of his unnamed slave women—by naming him James. By having a child with a woman whom he legally owned, Collier also technically owned James. Yet, by christening the infant and making him his namesake, Collier attempted to undermine this reality and recognize James as his son, not his slave. Baptism offered free and enslaved couples one means of bestowing characteristics that approximated freedom upon children. Other free people normally attended the baptisms of children with enslaved mothers and served as their godparents. Clearly, in some instances, free families tolerated and even sought to bring into their kin groups certain infants who were born into slavery.

Crossing the Boundaries of Race

As baptismal records attest, during the first half of the eighteenth century, the island's sexual culture was increasingly defined by interracial relations between women of African descent and free men of all races. Cross-racial relations were a part of the broader constellation of nonmarital sexual activities. A multitude of factors contributed to the prevalence of cross-racial intimacies during the first half of the eighteenth century. The colony's ever-growing participation in the slave trade ensured that African women

⁹¹ Baptisms of Thomas and William, 1750, Kingston Copy Register, Baptisms, vol. 1, 1722-1792, IRO; Baptism of James, 1729, Kingston Copy Register, Baptisms, vol. 1, 1722-1792, IRO.

were a significant presence in the colony. This was especially so in more rural and newer parishes, where women of European descent were less likely to live. As we have seen, marriageable white women regularly preferred to remain single. Furthermore, no laws existed to prevent miscegenation, and, as the English clergyman William May reported to the Bishop of London in 1733, the Jamaica Assembly would never pass a law prohibiting relations between planters and “their negro women.” Indeed, the Speaker of the Assembly had already announced “that people should be encouraged or rewarded for begetting mulattos, and that was best way to people the island.”⁹²

Even setting aside his moral outrage that “slave rebellions” were God’s punishment for the “scandalous detestable vice” of “keeping negro concubines,” May’s statements are revealing. May wrote when colonists were preoccupied with the Maroon War, which had the potential to incite a large and potentially fatal slave rebellion. As shown in the previous chapter, efforts to increase the free white population during the early eighteenth century were only modestly successful. While people continued to move to Jamaica, high mortality rates among the free population inhibited significant natural increase. The Speaker’s proposal to reward free whites for bearing multiracial children underscores how dire circumstances were for the free minority, who desperately needed to increase their numbers. It also draws attention to the difference between colonial and metropolitan attitudes toward interracial sex.

⁹² William May to Bishop Gibson, April 11, 1733, Fulham Papers, vols. 17 and 18, West Indies, 1661-1739, LPL.

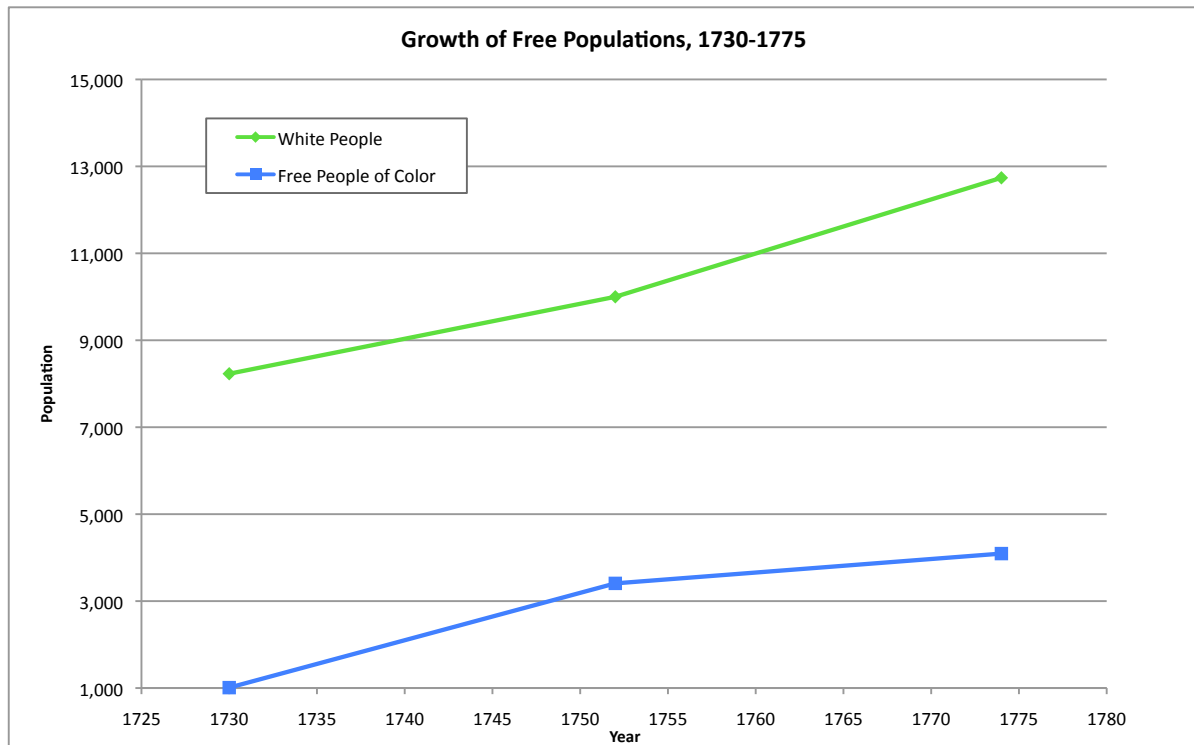


Figure 2.2. Growth of Free Populations, 1730-1775.⁹³

During the first half of the eighteenth century, interracial sex, especially between white men and women of African descent, became an ordinary feature of colonial life—so much so that it contributed to the rapid increase of the free population of color. In 1730, a little more than 8,000 white people and 1,000 free people of color shared the island.⁹⁴ By the 1770s, the number of free people of color had quadrupled to 4,000. Free people of color, the offspring of interracial relations, comprised a growing portion of the free population. While they faced and also challenged efforts to limit their rights, free people of color were not segregated or ostracized: they were active participants in the free community. They also had the potential, as the Speaker recognized, to augment the free

⁹³ Demographic information from Burnard, *Planters, Merchants, and Slaves*, 230.

⁹⁴ Ibid.

population, which would supposedly lead to the better protection of the colony from both slave uprisings and external attacks.

Most free people of African descent were born and lived outside of wedlock. Cultural mores were seemingly strong enough to discourage interracial marriages in spite of the fact that it was legal. Excluding free women of color from legitimate marriage denied them social respect and inheritance rights commanded by wives. In late eighteenth- and early nineteenth-century Jamaica, Christer Petley attests that “legal, social and ideological restraints combined to ensure that mistresses and illegitimate coloured children did not receive similar treatment to white wives and legitimate offspring.”⁹⁵ Inheritance laws and practical concerns partially explain white men’s unwillingness to marry multiracial partners. Most of the men who made bequests to lovers and illegitimate children were of middling and elite status. They were also widowers who, like widows, shared an incentive to protect the inheritances of children from past marriages. If men remarried—according to the common law tradition of dower—their new wives would be entitled to at least a third of their estates, and Jamaica wives typically received much larger legacies. Stepmothers, like stepfathers, could potentially erode fortunes set aside for children from an earlier marriage. It was as sensible for widowers to remain single and keep their estates intact as it was for widows to do so. Lower ranking men, especially those who were indentured servants, were not allowed to marry.

⁹⁵ Christer Petley studied Simon Taylor, reputedly the wealthiest man in Jamaica. Taylor gave a free woman of color who lived with him as his “housekeeper” and romantic companion for thirty years a rather stingy bequest. Taylor also left a considerable legacy of £500 for an enslaved quadroon girl named Charlotte Taylor, possibly his illegitimate daughter, but he declined to manumit her. Taylor’s bequests to his partner and daughter were paltry in comparison with his vast fortune. “‘Legitimacy’ and Social Boundaries.” 482, 493.

Regardless of rank, all of the men lived in a society where they could engage freely in partnerships outside of wedlock. All of these factors made marriage a very specific and often strategic or practical arrangement: not a necessary outlet for sexual desire. Yet, by remaining single, free women of African descent also maintained legal autonomy. They could—and did—buy, sell, and rent land and slaves, testify in court, and extend credit and assume debt under their own names. Marriage was not, as we have seen, the most beneficial legal status for free women to hold. Indeed, free white women regularly preferred to remain single and raise children out of wedlock, rather than be subjected to coverture, as the high illegitimacy rates for women of all races suggests.

A woman's position was not necessarily determined by her racial identity, nor did her marital status always secure her a larger inheritance. Although free women of African descent rarely married white men, they still received generous bequests of property, money, and slaves, and maintained the legal right to these gifts as single women. Free women of color who formed marriage-like partnerships received legacies that were comparable to those given to white wives. Single men sometimes described women of color as "friends," like the single women who gave legacies to single male "friends." For instance: Bathsua Gale, a free woman of color, would receive a "good feather bed" adorned with a "sett of white curtains" and, most importantly, the use and occupation of a piece of land in Kingston during her life from her partner, a doctor named Richard Hoy.⁹⁶ Hoy called Gale his "friend" in his 1740 will but also noted that she lived with him, indicating that they were romantically involved. While the couple never married, her inheritance was subjected to the same restrictions husbands commonly applied to wives' legacies—she could only use the property during her lifetime—suggesting her spouse-

⁹⁶ Will of Richard Hoy, 1740, vol. 22, IRO.

like status in Hoy's mind. Whether formally or informally married, women who were considered to be wives could be subjected to similar limitations.

Some free interracial couples took more concrete steps to legitimize their relationships. Ten years later, in 1750, a "free negro woman" named Mary Cartwright adopted the surname of her partner, a man named William Cartwright who was presumably white. By using Cartwright's surname, Mary adhered to the British custom that signified a woman's marital connection to her spouse. Indeed, the couple may have been married, for William made Mary his sole executor—a role wives commonly assumed. He additionally gave her his estate to use during her lifetime, also standard in husband-to-wife bequests. When Mary died, the couple's son, a "mulatto boy" named William Cartwright who was named after his father, would inherit the estate. Mary may have been enslaved when she began a relationship with William. She had four grandchildren who were still enslaved, and William ordered their manumission upon his death.⁹⁷

The Cartwright arrangement raises many questions about the nature of interracial relationships, and multiracial families that included free and enslaved members. If Mary was enslaved when their relationship began, did William coerce her into it? In making her executor and leaving her his estate, it would seem that William considered her to be his wife. Did they share a loving and even egalitarian long-term partnership? Mary must have had older children who were still enslaved. Were they William's children? It is, of course, impossible to answer questions about the emotive dynamics between the Cartwrights. Perhaps Mary pursued Cartwright because he offered her the only path out

⁹⁷ Interestingly, Mary's four grandchildren also had surnames, which indicates that they too had a free father. Will of William Cartwright, 1750, vol. 27, IRO.

of slavery, promising a better future for her children. Or maybe the couple truly loved each other. More likely, varying degrees of coercion, violence, love, desire, and need shaped the relationship between the Cartwrights and other couples.

Crossing the Boundaries of Slavery

Sexual brutality and violence, especially toward enslaved women, was an important component of the island's liberal sexual culture. Unlike free single women of color, enslaved women possessed no legal rights. They were some of the most marginalized, impoverished, and vulnerable members of colonial society. Barred from legal marriage, all of their sexual behavior was considered illicit.⁹⁸ British colonists radically altered their own laws relating to paternity and patriarchy in order to accommodate and protect slavery. Traditionally, fathers bore the ultimate legal authority over children. Men were also legally bound to provide for children, whether born outside or within a legitimate marriage. In the colonies, however, children born to enslaved mothers followed the condition of their mothers, regardless of whether their fathers were free or not. Barred from legal marriage and—more significantly—defined as property, enslaved men had no legal right to protect partners from sexual aggression and rape. The journals created by Thomas Thistlewood, a small Westmoreland planter in the 1750s and 1760s, document only too well how frequently men took advantage of their positions of power over enslaved women.⁹⁹

The majority of the sexual encounters between free, predominantly white men and enslaved women were not recorded. They were probably brief, and likely coercive. While

⁹⁸ Block, *Rape and Sexual Power in Early America*, 185.

⁹⁹ For a detailed account of Thomas Thistlewood's life, see Burnard, *Mastery, Tyranny, and Desire*.

some enslaved women formed lasting and seemingly affectionate relationships with white men, the nearly absolute power wielded by men in such relationships “compromised the meaning of consent.”¹⁰⁰ Yet, from the historian Barbara Bush’s work, we know that sexual relationships between black women and white men were not “purely repressive” and defined by “rape, seduction and sexual torture.” Bush suggests interracial relationships in the West Indies during the eighteenth century were more ambivalent, and she offers a more “subtle and complex framework” for interpreting them.¹⁰¹ She does not, however, discuss baptism or testamentary records, yet baptism records and wills made during the first half of the eighteenth century indicate that, for some women, interracial relationships were indeed more complicated and varied. The absence of institutional regulation of sexual behavior, combined with individuals’ rights to bequeath property as they saw fit, reveals how a constellation of personal interests, needs, and desires shaped intimacies that crossed the boundaries of race and slavery.

Enslaved women, not free white women or women of color, comprised the majority—sixty percent—of the women acknowledged as romantic partners in men’s wills. These relationships were commonplace in colonial society and involved men from across the social and economic spectrum. While extreme power differences between enslaved women and white men shaped their relationships, they also formed lasting bonds. The enslaved women and children who received bequests from free male lovers and fathers were treated as important family members. Emotional ties are evident in the efforts made by men to free and provide for enslaved partners and children. A slave woman named Joan, for instance, had a relationship with John Sibbald, a carpenter from

¹⁰⁰ Godbeer, *Sexual Revolution in Early America*, 202-201.

¹⁰¹ Bush, “White ‘Ladies,’ Coloured ‘Favourites’ and Black ‘Wenches,’” 253.

Kingston, despite being owned by another man. John probably lacked the resources or social standing to obtain Joan's liberty from her owner, but he sought to support her in other ways: in his 1740 will, he left Joan nearly everything he owned, including another slave, along with all his household goods and £28. It is plausible that Joan lived with John even though she technically belonged to someone else. He further emphasized Joan's right to his gifts, warning that "if Joan shall be disturbed or molested by her said master, or any other person, in the enjoyment of Venice [the slave] and household goods," a friend of John's would take possession of her legacy and presumably take care of it for her.¹⁰²

Joan's relationship shows how sexual and romantic liaisons with free men could allow women to maneuver outside the bounds of slavery, at least temporarily. Even though Joan was enslaved herself, John sought to give her the legal right to another person. This seemingly paradoxical act was commonplace in the eighteenth century. Slaves constituted the most valuable assets owned by poorer and middling men like John Sibbald, who had little else to offer in terms of material support. As a potential slave owner, Joan herself became invested in the system that held her in bondage. Unlike Sibbald, another carpenter named Thomas Gosdale was able to manumit his "mulatto wench Nancy" twenty years later because he owned her. This Nancy received a house to live in during her life, all of his moveable goods, and another slave named Violet, who had three children. Nancy's sexual and emotional ties to a free man had the potential to turn a slave into a slaveholding woman of lower middling status. While Nancy was Gosdale's main partner, he also freed and provided for another woman named Ebo and her children. Perhaps Ebo was also Gosdale's partner. Intriguingly, he also owed money

¹⁰² Will of John Sibbald, 1740, vol. 22, IRO.

to a free woman of color named Nelly, whom he gave a slave to, and asked that his debt of £11 to her be paid.¹⁰³ The lives of middling and poor men like William Meredith and John Gosdale were sexually, romantically, and financially intertwined with free and enslaved women of African descent. All moved through a complex and shifting landscape in which free and enslaved people formed close ties, slaves acquired freedom, and went on to become the owners of other slaves.

The lives of Joan, Nancy, and Ebo illustrate how free/unfree relationships could be strategic alliances for highly vulnerable, impoverished, and overworked female slaves. The slave system so severely reduced the rights of slaves that sexual relationships with free men offered one of the few ways enslaved women could improve their own and their children's conditions. Women who enjoyed greater intimacy and longer partnerships with free men were also more likely to be freed. More than half of the men who recognized enslaved women as partners left instructions and money for purchasing the freedom of their lovers after they died.¹⁰⁴ And freedom meant everything in Jamaican society: it was the definitive marker of status and identity, offering very different life possibilities to the precious few who held it. Enslaved women would have been particularly motivated to earn freedom and to better the lives of their children. Slavery forced women into positions where bearing the children of free men offered one of the only possibilities for achieving liberty for them. Leaving enslaved women with so few options was yet another insidious marker of chattel slavery.

¹⁰³ Will of Thomas Gosdale, 1760, vol. 32, IRO.

¹⁰⁴ 31 of the 50 women were enslaved and 19 were free women of color (identified as "mulatto," "quadroon" and "negro"). Men manumitted 20 out of the 31 enslaved women. Presumably more men freed partners prior to making wills.

For yet another example of this opportunistic sexual culture, consider the circumstances of enslaved woman Catalena who, in 1700, stood to earn her freedom, a £5 annuity, and her choice of slave from her lover, the planter Anthony Burrows. She also had the right to continue living on his property. While Catalena's intimacy with Burrows resulted in freedom and a modest income, and also made her a slave owner, she was not considered to be as important as the planter's widowed sister, who would inherit the bulk of his estate. Furthermore, Burrows made the gifts to Catalena contingent upon her remaining on the property, and probably serving his sister. If she left the plantation, Catalena would lose the annuity and the slave.¹⁰⁵ Nearly fifty years later, a slave named Grace formed a relationship with a free man James Crawford, and the couple had a daughter named Janetta. Crawford wanted mother and child to "enjoy privileges that free negroes enjoy" and also gave his daughter a slave. Grace received a £7 annuity for six years "to better bring up" Janetta.¹⁰⁶

The New Colonial Family

Colonial families like the one formed by James Crawford and Grace, resulted from the ambiguous and complicated status of family members, who were free and enslaved, white and black, male and female. Neat divisions between legitimate and illegitimate heirs were often difficult to articulate. This did not cause a "breakdown" of the colony's social order. Instead, the social order was comprised of complex familial and social relations that promiscuously traversed marital and racial boundaries. The lack of clarity regarding a person's "legitimacy" also helps to account for the prevalence of

¹⁰⁵ Will of Anthony Burrows, 1700, vol. 9, IRO.

¹⁰⁶ Will of James Crawford, 1748, vol. 27, IRO.

inheritance disputes in the colony. Over the course of a lifetime, free colonists regularly married and had legitimate children. When spouses died, men and women often pursued nonmarital relations. They created new families that included illegitimate free and enslaved children. Henry Lord, for instance, had a grown daughter Elizabeth from an earlier marriage. When his wife died, he and an enslaved woman named Dorothy “Dolly” Newberry became involved. However, Lord did not own his lover. His daughter Elizabeth and her husband John Peeke were the legal owners of Dorothy and the children, John and Nathaniel Newberry, whom Lord fathered with her. Elizabeth effectively owned her father’s mistress and her half brothers. Not trusting his daughter to free his new illegitimate and enslaved family, Lord left money to manumit them upon his death, and suspecting she might refuse he asked for the money to be invested for the benefit of Dorothy and their children.¹⁰⁷

Colonial families also tolerated female kin who engaged in nonmarital sex and embraced the children they bore out of wedlock. For instance, planter Joseph Martiny fathered a child with his slave Flavia who he freed and provided with two slaves. However, Martiny endowed another illegitimate child, his daughter Elizabeth’s “natural” son, John Shickle, with the remainder of his estate. Perhaps Martiny’s illicit activities made him more accepting of his daughter’s bearing a child out of wedlock. Not only did Martiny leave his entire estate to a fatherless grandson, he also requested that his “corpse” “be buried in a garden” on his grandson’s estate,” intimating the closeness of their family ties.¹⁰⁸ Claudius Archbould, a widower like Martiny, exhibited a similar acceptance of his eldest daughter Mary’s illegitimate child Julia Allen. Mary evidently gave birth to Julia

¹⁰⁷ Will of Henry Lord, 1740, vol. 22, IRO.

¹⁰⁸ Will of Joseph Martiny, 1770, vol. 38, IRO.

out of wedlock to one man and then went on to marry another. Rather than living the life of a shamed woman, she entered into a legitimate marriage; instead of treating his daughter and her child like outcasts, Archbould provided them with legacies when he died. Interestingly, he gave his younger daughter “books of devotion” and promised her the remainder of the estate, “provided she marry with the consent” of his executors. Perhaps the father sought to deter his younger daughter from following her sister’s path by rewarding her for entering into a legitimate and approved marriage. Archbould himself was hardly a paragon of virtue. He fathered a “little negro boy christened Samuel and surnamed Blake” with his “negro wench” Phillis, whom he wanted to be freed. The father wanted his illegitimate multiracial son to be “sent to school, in order to be educated in the Christian faith and to learn to read and write,” before entering into an apprenticeship.¹⁰⁹ Archbould’s daughters lived in the same house with their father’s enslaved mistress and half brother Samuel Blake. They and many others in Jamaica grew up with family members who traversed the boundaries of marriage, race, and slavery. These personal, wrenching dramas became normative childhood experiences.

It is impossible to assess how enslaved people negotiated the extreme inequalities of power between them and free relatives. Slavery perverted the bonds between parents and children. The fathers of enslaved children had no legal or even communal obligations to support their offspring and became the legal owners of their own flesh and blood. The children born to one enslaved and one free parent considerably blurred the distinctions between slavery and freedom. They embodied the instability at the heart of the terrible logic of slavery. Yet, these children also had a higher probability of obtaining freedom: 86 percent of the men who referred to children they fathered with enslaved women left

¹⁰⁹ Will of Claudius Archbould, 1740, vol. 22, IRO.

instruction—and often funding—for their children to be liberated.¹¹⁰ This was part of a broader pattern that emerges from nonmarital relations: of men favoring their illegitimate children with more considerable legacies than their lovers, irrespective of whether the mothers were free or enslaved, white, or black. Mary Ganton, a “free Indian woman” who lived with the planter Peter Major, received five slaves and twenty-five acres of land, which came out of the much larger parcel of 300 acres that Major gave to the couple’s illegitimate children, each of whom were given their father’s surname.¹¹¹ While Major treated Ganton like a surrogate spouse, their children were the primary beneficiaries of the relationship. However, it is equally likely that Mary herself wanted her children to receive the most from their father. The fathers of legitimate children followed a similar path, regularly favoring children with more sizable bequests than mothers.

Indeed, bequests to illegitimate children are the principle reason that men’s relations outside of marriage appear in wills. In all likelihood, men had countless sexual and/or romantic escapades with free and enslaved women that were never recorded. When children resulted from sexual relations, though, nonmarital relationships surface in wills and baptism records. Approximately 85 percent of the men who referred to nonmarital partners also mention children the couple had together.¹¹² While no records exist to suggest that men were compelled by law to provide for illegitimate children, unspoken cultural values likely motivated them to do so. Traditionally, women in Britain and America could name the fathers of children born outside of marriage, and local courts and communities would pressure the men to provide financial support for their

¹¹⁰ 25 of the 29 men who referred to enslaved women as the mothers of their children left orders to manumit or purchase the freedom of the children.

¹¹¹ Will of Peter Major, 1760, vol. 32, IRO.

¹¹² 43 of roughly 50 to 55 men who refer to relations outside of marriage mention children in their wills.

offspring. Similar cultural expectations were at play in Jamaica. The figures derived from men's wills indicate that the majority did not feel obligated to provide for lovers until children were involved. Rather than relying on local parishes to support illegitimate children, colonists expected individuals to take responsibility. A gendered double standard, rather than a sexual double standard, may explain why men were more forthright about nonmarital relations than women. Unwed fathers, not mothers, were expected to offer material support to children. The cultural expectation was powerful enough to override the gender, race, and enslaved/free status of a child.

In the early decades of the eighteenth century, colonial families were turning into complicated kin groups that included members in varying degrees of servitude and slavery. During the first half of the eighteenth century the effort and money invested by fathers in their free and enslaved multiracial children suggests that colonists were not using the family household to establish the kind of colonial order that the anthropologist Ann Laura Stoler has identified in other European colonies.¹¹³ In Jamaica, fathers actively sought to make the children of inter-racial unions into legitimate heirs. Nonmarital intimacy was so widespread, and the number of children born of such activities so great, that legal and social legitimacy did not hinge exclusively upon the marital status of partners. Furthermore, men and women commonly made efforts to transform illegitimate children into legitimate family members. Doctor John James Gorse, for example, provided his partner Fanny Duncan, a free mulatto woman, with one acre of

¹¹³ Ann Laura Stoler argues of the British empire in the nineteenth century: "only the public legitimization" of interracial sexual relationships through marriage and the "recognition that non-white children were the natural heirs to European inheritance could do serious damage to the social order of colonial societies." A century earlier colonists in Jamaica treated non-white children as "natural heirs." "Rethinking Colonial Categories: European Communities and the Boundaries of Rule," *Comparative Studies in Society and History* 31, no. 1 (1989): 134-161.

land and one slave in 1770. However, the couple's children, who assumed their father's surname, were given the bulk of his estate. Gorse's daughter would inherit six slaves. The rest of his 100-acre estate called "Shutter's Hill" and thirty-two slaves would be leased out and the profits invested in a trust for the couple's daughter and son.¹¹⁴ By the letter of the law, Gorse's children became his legitimate heirs. They were entitled to a legacy that was no different from what fathers bequeathed to legitimate white children. The difference was in what Fanny Duncan received, which was far less than the one-third of a partner's estate guaranteed to married women, and she had no legal right to claim more.

Free men's efforts to obtain the liberty of enslaved partners and children intimate the trauma and despair that slavery imposed upon families who could not legally be together. Using wills to manumit enslaved companions and children owned by other people may have been a last resort when all other means failed, even though testators would not be alive to enjoy the company of freed lovers and children. This sort of desperation emanates from planter Peter Finlay's adamant orders to his executors in 1770 to "endeavor to leave nothing undone that can be thought of" to free his "two quadroon children" and his lover Nancy, who was seventh months pregnant with the couple's third child, from their owner William Beckford Jr. Finlay implored his executors to "to do everything in their power," stating "I do hereby expect they will get each of the above named children and woman their freedom and proper manumission." Finlay had already remitted £146 to Britain to pay for his family's manumission and told his executors to pay the rest of the expenses out of his estate.¹¹⁵

¹¹⁴ Will of James Gorse, 1770, vol. 38, IRO.

¹¹⁵ Will of David Finlay, 1770, vol. 38, IRO.

Pereg Philips penned an even more desolate will ten years earlier, referring first to his “late severe indisposition,” which inspired him to “bestow what little Trash I may leave behind me to those to whom in gratitude I owe.” Though he had little to give, Philips declared “every penny’s worth was an honest acquisition.” As though to emphasize his integrity, he annexed “an exact account” of debts that he owed. After they were paid, the rest of his money was to be used to manumit his enslaved daughter Sally or to purchase another slave girl to replace her. He asked that Sally “be paid out of my poor Pittance the sum of twenty pounds” and gave Sally’s mother Camilla a mare and a filly for her daughter’s use. Philips specified that another mare was Camilla’s “property,” which he had given to her in the past. He also urged his executors to obtain the wages that were due to him, “which I beg the money may be got for and given to Camilla as it is justly her due.”¹¹⁶ The modest size of Philips’ estate, which consisted of a “little trash,” indicates that he probably did not have the funds to manumit both Camilla and Sally. Adult slaves were more expensive than children. Philips—or he and Camilla together—may have decided that freeing their daughter was the best use of his scarce resources. Yet, Philips’ gift of a horse to Camilla in the past, which he made an effort to emphasize as her “property,” and his request that any wages owed to him be given to his enslaved partner highlights his desire to provide what little he had to his ‘illegitimate’ family.

Free men of African descent also actively sought liberty for families who were still enslaved. In 1724, Goody Jacobson, a butcher and “free negro” from Port Royal, provided £35 to use in “pursuance of my bill of sale” to purchase the freedom of his daughter Judy and left her £10. Jacobson also requested that his sons in law be freed immediately after his decease and each be given a steer and a cow. Jacobson’s will

¹¹⁶ Will of Pereg Philips, 1760, vol. 32, IRO.

indicates how ownership of family members (son-in-laws in Jacobson's case) could be used as a strategy for protecting and eventually freeing kin. As the legal owner of his sons-in-law, Jacobson could protect the men while he was alive and then assert his right to free them upon his death.¹¹⁷

Although some men were able to manumit enslaved kin, all people—free and enslaved—lived in a society that revolved around slavery. None could truly be “free” from participating in it. Denied the rights that couples enjoyed through legal marriage, people from all levels of society devised a range of strategies to aid enslaved lovers and children. One custom that free people across society shared was that of bequeathing slaves to women and children who were still in bondage or recently freed. When placed within the larger context of colonial inheritance practices, this convention was not unusual. Slaves were also the primary form of property that men bequeathed to legitimate family members, especially to wives and daughters. Thus, slaves also became the currency that men offered to the families they established outside of wedlock. Giving slaves to recently freed children not only provided them with a source of labor and a valuable asset. It also emphasized the children's status as free. In 1740, planter Charles Aldcroft freed his daughter Amey, who he fathered with one of his slaves. Aldcroft did not free Amey's mother, but he gave his daughter “a negro child named Phirra” and £25.¹¹⁸ When a self-identified “Gentleman” named Dennis O'Brien manumitted his two daughters in 1748, he also gave the girls two slaves, placing the rest of his estate in a trust

¹¹⁷ Will of Goody Jacobson, 1724, vol. 16, IRO.

¹¹⁸ Will of Charles Aldcroft, 1740, vol. 22, IRO.

for them.¹¹⁹ Two years later planter Walter Martin freed his daughter Betsy and gave her three slaves of her own.¹²⁰

Freeing enslaved family members, especially the children born of free/enslaved unions, was of uppermost importance for many white men. Giving the children slaves reinforced the legal act of manumission in economic and socially significant ways. Slaves could not own slaves. Theoretically, only free people could own slaves. Thus, slave ownership provided the material foundations for women and children who were not protected by legal marriage. Slaves functioned as a primary currency in the colony, and could provide newly freed illegitimate children with financial support while adding a credential to their freedom. The bleak rationale of a slave society demanded the participation of all members because a person's freedom was always defined in relation to the relative enslavement of another person. Passing on slaves to the next generation, whether legitimate or illegitimate, maintained the slave system.

Freedom, slaveholding, and even wealth did not guarantee equality for multiracial children born out of wedlock. When Robert and Susannah Halhed, the children of a white man and a free woman of color, inherited a large estate from their father in 1753, they had to petition the Jamaica Council "to have and enjoy all other rights privileges immunities and advantages whatsoever as if they and every of them were born and descended of and from white ancestors."¹²¹ Free people of color had to apply to the

¹¹⁹ Will of Dennis O'Brien, 1748, vol. 28, IRO.

¹²⁰ Will of Walter Martin, 1750, vol. 27, IRO.

¹²¹ Jamaica Council Minutes, 1753, f. 184, NLJ.

Crown to be granted the same” rights of white subjects,” except for the ability to hold office or to vote in elections, which they were excluded from.¹²²

In 1760 the well-organized slave uprising called “Tacky’s Revolt” led to the passage of more restrictive measures against free people of color. The revolt seriously threatened the island’s free population, revealing the precariousness of their control of a large slave majority. The island-wide uprising, led by the slaves Tacky, Apongo, and Kingston, resulted in the deaths of a number of whites and caused considerable property damage.¹²³ In the aftermath of the revolt the growing financial and social power of free people of color raised fears about their possible collusion with slaves in future uprisings. In 1761, the Jamaica Assembly determined that free children of color born outside of wedlock held in aggregate £200,000 and £300,000 in estates.¹²⁴ In an effort to restrict their growing wealth, a law was passed in 1761 prohibiting non-whites from inheriting more than £1200 sterling from white testators.¹²⁵ Other laws were enacted requiring free people of color to register and to wear badges.¹²⁶

Tacky’s Revolt seemed to signify a turning point in the colonial attitude toward race, rather than sex. However, the population of free people of color continued to grow, attesting to the absence of any concerted effort to regulate interracial sex. The law limiting bequests to free people of color was also contested and ignored. A decade after Tacky’s Revolt, free women inherited sizeable estates from white partners. Judith Alcraft, a “free mulatto woman” who lived with a planter, received his entire estate. The 1770

¹²² Daniel Livesay, “Children of Uncertain Fortune: Mixed-Race Migration from the West Indies to Britain, 1750-1820” (Ph.D. diss., University of Michigan, 2010), 73.

¹²³ Burnard, *Planters, Merchants, and Slaves*, 161-162.

¹²⁴ In 1774, there were 23,000 people designated as “mulattoes” on the island and only 4,000 of them were free. Brown, *Reaper’s Garden*, 111.

¹²⁵ Petley, “‘Legitimacy’ and Social Boundaries,” 486.

¹²⁶ Newman, “Gender, Sexuality and the Formation of Racial identities in the Eighteenth century Anglo-Caribbean World,” 589-590.

bequest signifies Alcraft's position of importance and esteem in her partner's life; what's more, she was treated accordingly, receiving his entire estate as wives frequently did.¹²⁷

In the same year, a free woman of color named Rose established a nonmarital family with John Vassall. Their bond ensured that the couple's three children were handsomely provided for, receiving eight slaves, a 130-acre parcel of land known as "Purgatory," all of the household furniture, and livestock.¹²⁸ Rose was not merely Vassall's mistress or concubine. She would assume authority over his estate when he died, as wives often did, and her children would become middling planters and slaveholders.

Conclusion

A number of circumstances—high mortality rates, the expansion of slavery, and the absence of powerful religious and political institutions—reduced the colony's capacity for regulating people's sexual practices. Single parenting, female-headed households and nonmarital sex were commonplace features of island society. Men and women alike engaged in a spectrum of intimate relationships during their lifetimes. Marriage was important to colonists. However, when spouses died, they pursued relations with "friends" and partners who they chose not to wed for personal and practical reasons. Free people created a secular, profit-oriented society in which legitimate marriage coexisted with nonmarital partnerships. As a result, the "normative" colony family included children who were legitimate and illegitimate, of European and African descent, and who were free and enslaved.

¹²⁷ Edward Tittle's surname indicates that he may have been the son of another man. Will of James Hugh, 1770, vol. 38, IRO.

¹²⁸ Will of John Vassall, 1770, vol. 38, IRO.

While highlighting the spectrum of relations that existed between free and enslaved people, the enormous social, economic, and legal inequalities undergirding these relationships are evident. White men's sexual freedom did not correspond with the repression of white women's sexuality. While gender and race inflected sexual behavior, making white women more reticent about interracial relations, for example, their status as free mattered more. Free women's sexual autonomy was one expression of possessing freedom in a slaveholding society: freedom was not determined by gender, but rather by a person's unlimited legal authority over slaves. White men's acts of sexual violence against enslaved women manifested the unlimited nature of freedom in a society of slaves.

Even so, colonial baptismal records and wills add texture and emotion to a stark narrative, which has traditionally focused on the sadistic and brutal activities of free white men. In a system that severely disempowered and dehumanized enslaved people, some women and their children achieved freedom. To a remarkable degree, colonists recognized children born out of wedlock to free and enslaved parents, and used inheritance to integrate them into legitimate, free families. Free people grew accustomed to familial situations that included half brothers and sisters, some of whom were enslaved. Furthermore, they learned that these types of relations were socially tolerated

CHAPTER THREE

“Till Death Do Us Part”

Marriage, Inheritance, and the Rise of Equity Law

In 1737, Rebekah Osborn asked to be buried in a plain cedar coffin and forbade her family from handing out mourning gloves and scarves at her funeral.¹ A few years later, Ann Mills, a shopkeeper in Kingston, echoed Osborn’s instructions, and requested to be buried in a “quite plain” coffin “without covering.”² Neither of the women approved of ostentation. No flourishes, no mementos—only a solemn gathering of family and friends, the women imagined, would mark their passage out of life. Other women envisioned funerals that would reunite them with lost spouses. Widow Elizabeth Turnbridge, for instance, wanted to be buried alongside her husband, asking for a “handsome tombstone” to be placed upon their grave.³ Not satisfied with resting next to her spouse, Widow Mary Carelton asked that the “corpse of my late husband” be dug up from his grave and reinterred with her body in her family’s ancestral burial ground.⁴ For others, the funeral could even become an act of vengeance. Thomas Simson wanted his

¹ Will of Rebekah Osborn, 1737, vol. 21, IRO.

² Will of Ann Mills, 1745, vol. 25, IRO.

³ Will of Elizabeth Turnbridge, 1727, vol. 17, IRO.

⁴ Will of Mary Carleton, 1742, vol. 24, IRO.

body preserved “above ground & uninterred for three weeks” when he died—a request rendered more gruesome by the hot, humid climate of Jamaica. Simson would not be buried next to his wife. Instead, he specifically barred her and her relations from attending his funeral.⁵ Regardless of whether one’s funeral was ornate, unvarnished, or macabre, it served as the denouement in a colonist’s life. Rebekah, Ann, Elizabeth, and Mary were able to make wills and leave written instructions for their funerals because they were single. Married women could not author their entrée into the afterlife with such precision. Nor could they countermand the orders of husbands like Thomas Simson, no matter how extreme. The funeral was the first act in the larger performance of inheritance set into motion by the will of the deceased person.

In Jamaica, the family was one of the chief conduits through which resources flowed: marriage and death redirected the currents. These two life events bring the island’s evolving legal culture and the influence of legal practices on free women’s lives into focus. Marriage significantly altered a woman’s legal, financial, and social standing. Traditionally, the British common law of coverture circumscribed wives’ rights, making it difficult for them to hold property, transact business, and act as autonomous legal subjects. Whenever someone died, common law also determined how a family’s resources would be reshuffled: this was a matter of great consequence in an era when inheritance, not wage labor, provided the most considerable resources.⁶ Common law ensured that inheritance, like marriage, would uphold a patriarchal social order, funneling the majority of a family’s wealth into male hands. Customarily, wives were only entitled to dower, or the use of one-third of her family’s estate during her life. The other

⁵ Will of Thomas Simson, July 11, 1725, “Abstracts of Jamaica Wills, 1625–1792,” Add. Mss., 34,181, BL.

⁶ Amy Erickson, *Women and Property in Early Modern England*, 3.

conventions of primogeniture and entail favored the eldest sons, who inherited entire estates to the disadvantage of their mothers and siblings.

The wills made by Rebekah, Ann, Elizabeth, and Mary, then, stand out against the backdrop of a legal system that was designed to divest them of property or the authority to make wills. But British legal culture was undergoing significant changes throughout the Anglo-Atlantic world in their lifetimes, in ways that benefited women specifically. In Jamaica, Common Law was proving unwieldy and impractical by the end of the seventeenth century. Free people started investing heavily in African slave labor, began to amass considerable wealth, and frequently died in possession of large fortunes. Such circumstances encouraged a local preference for the newer equity law, which allowed individuals more flexible means of owning and passing on property, a large portion of which consisted of slaves.

During the first half of the eighteenth century, free people deployed equity, establishing trusts, annuities, and marriage contracts to shore up women's property rights within marriage. These actions slowly eroded the strictures of coverture. Equity also reshaped inheritance practices. Husbands and fathers provided wives and daughters with more substantial legacies and gave them authority over family estates. The widespread usage of equity to handle property ownership within marriage and death altered women's positions, extending their legal, economic and social autonomy. Slavery was central to this change. Defined as personal property, slaves—a novel and valuable source of labor and wealth—quickly became the most popular form of property to bequeath to women. By enhancing free women's legal claims to property, a large portion of which was vested in slaves, equity helped make women crucial investors in the slave system.

The Growth of an Anglo-Atlantic Legal Culture

Jamaica's legal system was an amalgam of the divergent British legal conventions of common law and equity. Common law courts emerged from feudal customs that prevailed during the Saxon and Norman periods of English history, and subsequently reformed and improved over time. Common law covered the broad range of legal subjects, from individual rights to criminal law, and tended to follow precedent rather than statute. Originating in the fourteenth century, the court of Chancery, or equity, was a newer system of judicature jointly approved of and established by the Crown and the Church. Equity was devised to provide a remedy to the potentially oppressiveness or inequity of common law. Chancellors, rather than juries, decided cases in equity courts, which gained jurisdiction over trusts, land law, fraud, security for money lending, charities, the administration of the estates imperiled by mental illness, and the guardianship of infants.⁷ However, beginning in the Elizabethan era, equity's popularity grew, and the operation of two competing legal systems created conflict. At the time that England seized Jamaica, chancery courts were drawing criticism. Their cases could be lengthy and expensive, involving the settlement of numerous accounts, inquiries into debts, and a "hundred other little facts to be cleared up" before a decree was issued.⁸ Efforts to reform the chancery courts in Britain continued into the eighteenth century with modest success.

⁷ William Blackstone, *Commentaries on the Laws of England*, Book 3, Chapter 27 (London: 1765-1769), <http://www.lonang.com/exlibris/blackstone/bla-327.htm>.

⁸ Ibid.

The fraught relationship between common law and equity shaped the evolution of legal systems in British America.⁹ Colonies such as Massachusetts, Connecticut, and Pennsylvania, which were founded by religious dissenters who sought to distance themselves from the Crown, did not set up equity courts. Women's property rights were lessened in these locations. Jamaica, New York, Virginia, South Carolina, and Maryland, on the other hand, were settled by entrepreneurs and maintained close ties with the Crown. They established chancery courts. South Carolina and Jamaica, in particular, shared many commonalities. Both colonies were plagued by high mortality rates and increasingly defined by chattel slavery. All of these factors made equity, and the protective measures it offered, increasingly popular. Women who lived in these colonies benefited greatly.¹⁰ Jamaica established a Supreme Court, also known as the Grand Court, to handle all common law civil cases over £20 as well as criminal cases involving fraud, larceny, burglary, arson, forgery, carnal abuse, infanticide, obeah, manslaughter, and perjury—all of which are inaccessible.¹¹ The colony's chancery court decided equity cases that included estates, trusts, and inheritance.

While similarities connected Jamaica to mainland America, conditions were more extreme on the island, making equity even more important. Appalling mortality rates saw

⁹ Equity and common law were still widely perceived of as oppositional, with equity acting as an abatement of the "rigor" of the common law in the eighteenth century: a belief Blackstone sought to dispel in his work. Ibid.

¹⁰ High mortality rates weakened the English patriarchal ideal in Southern colonies. Similar circumstances shaped gender dynamics in Jamaica. Lois Green Carr and Lorena Walsh, "The Planter's Wife: The Experience of White Women in Seventeenth-Century Maryland," *WMQ* 34, no. 4 (1977): 542-71.

¹¹ An act was passed in 1683 for the establishment of a Supreme Court of Judicature in Spanish Town. The court was still operating in 1740. Charles Leslie called it both the Supreme Court and the Grand Court and it sat four times a year. The only existing volume of eighteenth century proceedings in the Supreme Court is held at the Jamaica Archives and deemed to be too fragile for research. Apparently, it was microfilmed at one point, but the archivists have no record of where the microfilm is located. *Laws of Jamaica, Passed by the Assembly and Confirmed by His Majesty in Council* (London: 1683), ff. 171-183; Leslie, *A New History of Jamaica*, 173, 302; Supreme Court Records, 1A/5/1, JA.

little improvement during the first decades of the eighteenth century.¹² Lives were cut short by a variety of viral and bacterial diseases, including malaria, yellow fever, small pox, dysentery, and dropsy, all of which were virtually incurable with early modern medicine.¹³ Immigrants rarely survived for more than thirteen years after their arrival, while island-born whites commonly died before the age of forty.¹⁴ Infant mortality was particularly grim. In Kingston, for instance, white infants had a thirty-three percent chance of surviving past age five.¹⁵ Despite the likelihood of death, colonists made an unprecedented and massive investment in the African slave trade. Over the course of ninety years, the African slave population grew by a factor of eleven, while the free population only doubled. From 1673, slavery became a defining feature of island life, shaping all of its contours. Slaves represented a new form of private property that constituted a large portion of colonists' personal wealth. Free people used equity measures to protect their investment in human capital.

¹² Amussen, *Caribbean Exchanges*, 81.

¹³ Dunn, *Sugar and Slaves*, 301-303.

¹⁴ Brown, *Reaper's Garden*, 17.

¹⁵ Burnard, *Mastery, Tyranny, and Desire*, 16.

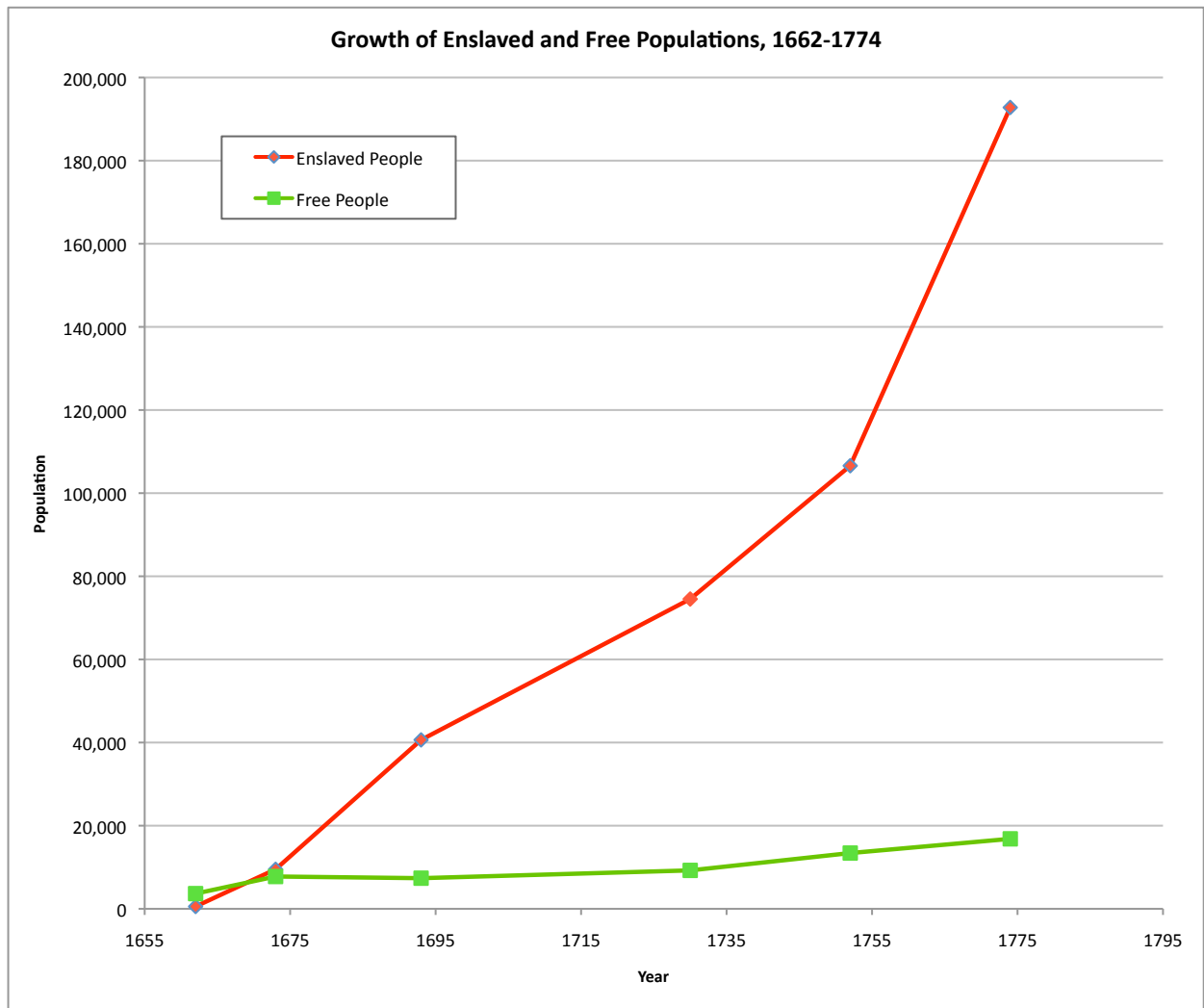


Figure 3.1. Growth of Enslaved and Free Populations, 1662-1774.

Trusts, Separate Estates, and the Erosion of Coverture

The rising popularity of equity procedures for structuring marriage and inheritance throughout the Anglo-Atlantic world was but one manifestation of broader debates about the relationship between gender and authority. Marriage crystallized the conflict between common law and equity. It was a legally binding compact that reconstituted men's and women's rights along gendered lines, in ways that largely benefitted the husbands. The common law of coverture treated marriage as an ideal

“unity of person,” while giving the husband nearly all of the legal power to act for the unified couple.¹⁶ Women relinquished their rights to any property they owned at the time of wedlock to husbands, and therefore rendered themselves financially dependent.¹⁷ Wives who were under coverture could not testify on their own behalves in court, or author wills, sign contracts, assume debts, or extend credit under their own names.¹⁸ Men were expected to provide for their wives in exchange for the legal and financial authority they gained. Husbands were also expected to assume liability for any debts their wives contracted or crimes they committed.¹⁹ Coverture was intended to bolster patriarchal authority within the household, treating women, children, and servants as dependents of independent husbands. This was accomplished, in part, by investing men with a proprietary right to family property.

Common law measures were created in Britain during the early modern period to protect women from the wide-ranging power coverture invested in men. For instance, wives were entitled to dower—or one third of their husbands’ estates—if their spouses died. Husbands could not convey or sell this protected portion of property without obtaining wives’ permission, and courts privately examined wives to ensure that husbands were not coercing them to sell property. Equity provided a more definitive remedy to the common laws that were nested into coverture. At the end of the sixteenth century, equity courts began to administer wives’ separate estates. Women who established separate estates, which were also called marriage settlements, maintained control over their property during marriage. Parents also set up trusts for daughters to

¹⁶ Marylynn Salmon offers an overview of coverture in colonial America. *Women and the Law of Property*, 14-15.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, 76.

¹⁸ Bailey, “Favoured or oppressed?,” 351.

¹⁹ *Ibid.*

ensure their property was kept separately from spouses if they married. As Marylynn Salmon notes: “There can be no doubt...that the development of equity rules and precedents...represented a radical breakthrough for women. It was the most significant change in the legal status of women until the advent of the married women’s property acts in the nineteenth century.”²⁰ By giving women a means of maintaining independent property within marriage, equity contradicted coverture. While a handful of scholars have drawn attention to the role of equity in reshaping women’s legal, economic, and social positions, the extent of its influence, especially in the American context, deserves further exploration.²¹

During the last decades of the seventeenth century, free people increasingly used equity to design marital partnerships, creating separate estates, trusts, and annuities for wives. In choosing to use equity to organize marital relations, colonists responded to local circumstances while also participating in larger patterns of change. It is no coincidence that the rising popularity of equity paralleled the rapid growth of slavery. Facing chilling mortality rates, couples understood that they were unlikely to grow old together. Trevor Burnard calculates that the average marriage in the parish of St. Andrew between 1666 and 1731 lasted between six to eight years.²² Women tended to marry earlier than men. As a result, they were more likely to survive their husbands.²³ Marriage was a life phase rather than a permanent status, and women, in particular, cycled between wedlock and widowhood. As Governor Nicholas Lawes wryly observed in the early

²⁰ Salmon, *Women and the Law of Property*, 81.

²¹ For an overview of how these changes influenced women’s lives in England, see Erickson, *Women and Property in Early Modern England*. See also Susan Staves, *Married Women's Separate Property in England, 1660-1833* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1990); Froide, *Never Married*, 117-128; and Sturtz, *Within Her Power*.

²² Burnard, “A Failed Settler Society,” 67.

²³ This pattern was comparable to marriage patterns in Britain where most wives survived their husbands in the merchant community. Grassby, *Kinship and Capitalism*, 47.

eighteenth century, “the female art of growing rich here in a short time was comprised in two significant words, “*marry and bury.*””²⁴ While women’s actions were probably less mercenary than Lawes suggested, frequent remarriage created thorny and conflicting claims to property. Family holdings, which were being augmented with slaves, needed to be safeguarded.

With wives likely to survive husbands, it made sense for couples to establish separate estates, and to invest women with the necessary legal authority to provide for themselves and whatever children a couple had. They deployed equity measures, which safeguarded women’s rights to property, to protect family resources. Free people did not seek to make women equal to men. Yet, their legal decisions had the cumulative effect of enhancing women’s legal, financial, and social authority, both within marriage and without. Local interest in upholding patriarchal values proved to be less important than caring for family interests. Colonists used equity as a means of protecting family estates from the vagaries of island life and profligate husbands. In an effort to preserve property intended solely for female kin, people set up trusts or separate estates.

Women, especially widows who had been married before, displayed a shrewd understanding of the distinctive rights they possessed under equity and common law. Many set up trusts and created separate estates to maintain ownership of their property during wedlock. This trend in Jamaica mirrored patterns in mainland America, where widows regularly instigated their own settlements prior to remarriage.²⁵ Though Jamaican marriage settlements have proven difficult to locate, wills refer to their existence. For

²⁴ The author would like to thank David Ryden for drawing her attention to this quote, cited in Trevor Burnard, “Inheritance and Independence: Women’s Status in Early Colonial Jamaica,” *WMQ* 48, no. 1 (1991): 113.

²⁵ Salmon, *Women and the Law of Property*, 89.

instance, Priscilla Saunders mentioned “considerable sums of money” she had paid towards her husband’s debts “out of my own separate estate and effects,” signaling that the couple agreed to a separate estate, or settlement, prior to the marriage.²⁶ This legal agreement gave Saunders the right to decide whether to bail her husband out. Without it, he would have assumed legal ownership of her “considerable sum” of money upon wedlock.

Women who held separate estates could make wills and devise the property that was identified in a marriage contract as they chose. For instance, Margaret Roe offered her second husband a mare named Betty that was branded with the initials of her first husband. Roe explicitly stated that she left this small “token” to Thomas “as an absolute cutting of my said husband from any manner of estate real or personal in this island.” She used standard legal rhetoric, and alluded to the marriage contract the couple had signed in 1686 that gave her “full liberty sole power and absolute authority to give and bequeath” all of the real and personal property that she brought to the marriage. Roe had assumed full authority over her first husband’s estate, which included “negro slaves, horses, and goats,” when he died. She used equity as a means of safeguarding this property for her son from the first marriage.²⁷

The provisions in Roe’s will indicate that colonists were employing equity at the end of the seventeenth century, just as these procedures were gaining favor in Britain. Women like Roe, who had children from previous marriages to provide for, were particularly concerned about maintaining ownership of their property when they remarried. Judith Marshall also referred to the marriage contract she had signed with her

²⁶ Will of Priscilla Saunders, 1729, vol. 18, IRO.

²⁷ Will of Margaret Roe, 1686, vol. 3-5, IRO.

second husband in her last will of 1708. Under it, Marshall had the right to bequeath a legacy of £595 that she had inherited from her father—in addition to £297 and the “residue” of her dower in an estate called Spring Plantation—to the two daughters from her first marriage and £446 to her brother’s children. However, she also decided to allot her current husband with one third of all the sugar made on the estate.²⁸ Marshall’s ability to bequeath the majority of her estate to her children resulted from the creation of a separate estate prior to her second marriage. Similarly, in 1716, Dorothy Salmon referred to the “full authority” that her marriage settlement granted her to manage her property “with or without her husband’s consent.” Salmon gave her daughter from her first marriage eight slaves, as well as clothing, filigree buttons, a green stone ring, six locketts, a “New England” horse, and all of her cows and calves.²⁹ Her son would inherit the remainder. Dorothy saw fit to allow her “loving” second husband “fifteen negroes” for the work on his sugar plantation.

Colonial women like Marshall and Salmon owned land. Unlike their counterparts in Britain, however, they also commanded slaves. Marriage was a desirable state for the women. They chose to enter wedlock more than once. They also stood to lose more when they returned to coverture. Early in the eighteenth century, women were turning to equity to maintain legal ownership of property, which regularly included slaves, during marriage. Rather than abating, efforts to use equity to protect women’s property continued. Widows who intimately understood coverture were particularly concerned with safeguarding assets for their daughters. In 1744, the widow Elizabeth Hargrave signed an agreement with her future husband before the couple married, which “notwithstanding...coverture,”

²⁸ Will of Judith Elizabeth, Marshall, 1708, vol. 11, IRO.

²⁹ Will of Dorothy Salmon, 1716, vol. 14, IRO.

“empowered” her to write her own will and bequeath £7,142 as she saw fit. Elizabeth then used established trusts for her daughters, and required the sum for one who was married to be kept “separate from her husband” and “not subject to his control during her life.”³⁰ Likewise, the widow Charity Butler left instructions for ten slaves to be held in a trust for her daughter, the wife of a planter, “for her sole and separate use.” It was Butler’s “express will” that her daughter’s husband had “no power to intermeddle with the said negro slaves and that he do not receive any benefit from them.”³¹ Similarly, the widow Elizabeth Eagon placed five slaves and fifty acres of land in a trust for her daughter Olive’s sole use. Eagon insisted that the legacy was “not be subjected to coverture or intermeddling” of Olive’s husband: it was for Olive’s “separate benefit.”³² Margaret Tenticoe left ten slaves and the rest of her estate to her daughter, barring her daughter’s husband “from having any right title or claim,” from the legacy, and ordering that “he shall have no authority to sell or alienate her inheritance.”³³

During the first half of the eighteenth century, many widows sought to preempt daughters’ husbands from invoking coverture by establishing trusts, often going to elaborate lengths to reach such a goal. The widow Anne Owen did not want her son-in-law to have access to her substantial estate, which included 500 acres, slaves, and £2,143. The mother therefore sought to prevent him from taking any step under the auspices of coverture to profit from her daughter Mary’s inheritance. Owen insisted that Mary alone would have the right to sell, to hire, and to enjoy the wages and the “future increase” of her twelve slaves “notwithstanding her coverture” and without “the consent of her

³⁰ Will of Elizabeth Etough, Kingston, 1744, vol. 24, IRO.

³¹ Will of Charity Butler, 1744, vol. 24, IRO.

³² Will of Elizabeth Howard Eagon, 1737, vol. 21, IRO.

³³ Will of Margaret Tenticow, 1752, vol. 28, IRO.

husband.” Any financial requests related to the trust would need to be written in the daughter’s hand and signed by three witnesses, and Mary’s trustees would pay out the money directly to her “for her sole separate and peculiar use.”³⁴

Family members also used trusts to circumvent any claims that the husbands of other female kin might make. Women understood the need. Lady Mary Molesworth placed £308 in a trust to pay off the debts of her niece and gave her an annuity of £46, insisting that her niece’s husband shall have no power thereof...notwithstanding her coverture.³⁵ But men, too, used such stipulations to shield a legacy intended for female kin from husbands. Barnart Woodstock set up a trust for his “beloved sister” and ordered her trustees to only accept receipts in her handwriting, “notwithstanding her coverture.” It was Andriess’ unequivocal “will and meaning...that my said sister’s husband...shall not receive take or intermeddle in the same but that it shall be for the separate use and benefit of my sister.”³⁶ Similarly, Thomas Hals, Jr. created a trust for his “dear and honored” mother and worked to ensure it would not “be subject to the power control or debts of her said husband or any future husband but to be enjoyed by her and to be disposed of...notwithstanding her coverture.”³⁷ The equity trust instrument allowed them to shield money for women, regardless of whether the women were married. Without the trust, her husband could squander any money given to a married woman.

An array of factors could account for the decision to take additional steps to protect a legacy. Generally, people set up separate trusts to insulate female relations from profligate husbands, or from debt collectors who could seize husbands’ estates. When

³⁴ Will of Anne Owen, 1734, vol. 19, IRO.

³⁵ Will of Mary Molesworth, 1721, vol. 15, IRO.

³⁶ Will of Barnart Andriess Woodstock, 1753, vol. 29, IRO.

³⁷ Will of Thomas Richard Hals, 1748, vol. 27, IRO.

Elizabeth Taylor gave her daughter a £2,536 legacy, she stressed that the money was a “separate estate” from her husband and hence “not subject to his debts.”³⁸ Taylor understood that a trust established in her name could not be touched. It is possible that some husbands even urged parents to establish discrete trusts for wives, as it would guarantee the family an additional, legally distinct source of funds that could not be accessed by debt collectors.

Some colonists hinted at darker reasons behind the offensive against coverture. In an era before most people could seek legal divorce, relatives used legacies to offer financial support and a modicum of independence to kinswomen trapped in miserable marriages. Establishing trusts was a means of preventing cruel and abusive husbands from wresting control of precious resources from wives. Few wills overtly state marital strife as a reason for creating stipulations or establishing trusts for women, but some imply it. Widow Mary Wait entrusted £71, all of her wearing apparel, and £29 to purchase a “new negro wench” to her kinswoman Elizabeth Bruce, “who now lives with me.” The bequest was intended for Bruce’s “sole and separate use exclusive of her husband.” Though Bruce was married, she could have sought refuge from her husband in Wait’s home.³⁹ Wait designated money, clothing, and a slave for Bruce to ensure that her kinswoman could continue to support herself. Similarly, Maynard Clarke gave £214 to his “dear unhappy & much injured niece” by marriage and openly expressed his contempt for her husband, his “profligate abandoned nephew.” Clarke wanted his niece to use the money to travel to England and see her children.⁴⁰

³⁸ Will of Elizabeth Taylor, 1752, vol. 28, IRO.

³⁹ Will of Mary Wait, 1760, vol. 32, IRO.

⁴⁰ Will of Maynard Clarke, 1759, vol. 32, IRO.

Priscilla Guy went one step further and actively attempted to separate her granddaughter from her husband. Guy placed 780 acres of land in trust jointly for her daughter and her granddaughter “exclusive” of the latter’s husband.”⁴¹ Guy made her dislike of the man clear, stating he should “not have or interfere with it, or any part of my estate.” Additionally, Guy tried to persuade husband and wife to live separately by giving the husband a sixty-five acre cattle pen and a slave, and giving her granddaughter the rent from this cattle pen, “provided she does not live with her husband.” If she did, her mother would inherit the pen and slave woman instead. However, Guy promised her entire estate to the granddaughter if she decided not to “cohabit” with her husband.

Coverture and Equity in Conflict

The transition from common law to equity was not a comprehensive, seamless process. The overlapping—and often competing—aims of coverture and equity could turn marriage into a perfect storm. Colonists continued to display common law understandings of marriage even as they used equity remedies. They held a dualistic perspective of marital relations that allowed for these competing legal definitions to coexist. Families often sutured common law and equity together, seeking to meet the differing needs of spouses and children. This approach placed wives in particularly ambiguous legal positions, which in turn led to confusion over how much gender influenced a person’s authority within the family.

The suits colonists brought to the colonial chancery court expose how the competing aims of common law and equity, which made women’s legal positions within marriage uncertain, led to family disputes. In 1709, a case that William Martin brought

⁴¹ Will of Priscilla Guy, 1748, vol. 26, IRO.

against his mother, Elizabeth Bows, best reveals how transitioning between widowhood and marriage created complicated, competing claims to property. When Martin filed a suit against his mother, she had already been married four times. Her first husband made her the owner of a large plantation and slaves when he died. A year later, Bows married Martin's father, her second husband, who became "seized in right of his wife several parcels of land" that she brought to the marriage claiming his right under coverture to her estate. The couple thereafter sold nineteen of her slaves and the property.⁴² Her second husband also bequeathed six of her slaves to their son. He died shortly after marrying Bows, who went on to marry her third husband, a planter, who convinced his wife to petition the man, whom she and Martin's father had sold her property to, for a re-conveyance. Once the couple re-gained control of this estate, Bows gave all of the slaves to her son. When the third husband died, Bows married another planter. During her fourth marriage, she and her husband issued a "writ of judicature" against her son to reclaim the slaves she had given to him. *Martin v. Bows* exemplifies how a woman's position changed each time she married. Bows's husbands used their authority under common law to sell, convey, and re-claim property that she had inherited. During her second and third marriages, Bows made an effort to make her son the legal owner of her slaves. Yet, her fourth time at the altar resulted in an attempt to challenge his right to the slaves.

A suit brought by James Draper to the chancery court in 1739 further illustrates the divide between common law and equity. Draper made a marital claim that was based on both common law and equity principles. He contended that his wife's mother had promised to give her daughter a £1,429 marriage portion, which he would assume control of "in right of his wife." Yet, Draper also believed his wife had the right to be supported

⁴² Suit brought by William Martin, July 18, 1709, Chancery Court Records, 1707 to 1709, vol. 3, JA.

out of the profits earned by her family's £14,286 estate, according to provisions in her father's will.⁴³ In this regard, he made an equity claim. His mother-in-law saw things differently: she charged Draper a £130 fee for the "maintenance" of his wife. In charging him, she also turned to a common law understanding that husbands were obligated to financially support their wives.

Another suit brought before chancery in 1739 also highlights the legal tensions inherent in marriage. When a widow named Elizabeth Eaton decided to remarry, she was "in good circumstances," having "by her labour and industry saved a considerable sum of money."⁴⁴ One suitor, who was "pleased" with her fortune, "induced her to become his wife." He promised to settle land and slaves upon her, and Eaton's friends urged her to accept his proposal. The couple agreed on a settlement that entitled Eaton to the property upon her new husband's death. But when he died several years later, his widow discovered that the deed devising the land and slaves to her had never been proved in the colonial Secretary's Office. This voided any equity-based claim to the legacy. She suspected foul play and believed that either her husband's "contrivance" or the "negligence" of their attorney had resulted in this error. Eaton also suspected her late husband's friends, who sought to eject her from the property, of plotting against her. When he fell ill at their house during a visit, she claimed, they took advantage of his "weak and infirm" condition, coercing him to change his will by conveying the land and slaves to them instead of his wife. Eaton's case highlights the tenuousness of women's rights to property during marriage. Even though Eaton created a marriage settlement, and her husband made a will, her claim to his property was insecure. One clerical error

⁴³ James Draper v. Jane Blackwood, September 28, 1739, Chancery Court Records, 1738-1744, vol. 10, JA.

⁴⁴ William and Mary Hall v. Elizabeth Goodin, August 24, 1739, in *ibid*.

opened her up to legal challenges. Manifold legal issues arose when husbands predeceased wives. However, legal contests also arose when wives who held separate estates died before their husbands. Dorothy Andreas's death in 1707 triggered a legal battle between the guardian of her son from her first marriage and her second husband. Andreas died in possession of a large plantation worked by eighty slaves and valued at £833.⁴⁵ She wanted her son to inherit the estate, and agreed to a marriage settlement with her second husband to "prevent" his embezzling the estate. After her death, this equity measure—the marriage settlement—failed to protect her plantation. Her second husband was accused of killing hogs, stealing money, and illegally reaping crops. While her son's guardian argued the second husband had violated their marriage agreement, the husband contended he had a right to his wife's estate via coverture. According to the husband's version of events, his wife had locked him out of her home while she was alive and "bid him leave her house and go to his house." She also hid money from him, and forbade him to sell cattle from the estate that she brought to the marriage, "even though she was under coverture." From the husband's perspective, his wife had challenged his patriarchal rights and contradicted gender conventions by her actions. Certain neighbors apparently agreed, and described her as a "very unkind unquiet and turbulent wife."⁴⁶

Barrs v. Andreas, along with other Jamaican chancery cases, sheds light on the inherent conflict between two legal understandings of who held marital authority. While women actively used equity to maintain legal claims upon resources they owned prior to marriage, such claims were fragile after marriage. Amy Erickson argues that

⁴⁵ Robert Hart, administrator of George Barrs, v. Bernard Andreas, October 8, 1707, Chancery Court Records, 1707-1709, vol. 3, JA. £833 would be worth approximately £109,000 today. The tool on the website *Measuring Worth* was used to make the calculation: www.measuringworth.com.

⁴⁶ Robert Hart, administrator of George Barrs, v. Bernard Andreas, October 8, 1707, in *ibid*.

contemporary scholars have placed undue emphasis on the power of coverture, which has led to their characterization of early modern England as an “intensely patriarchal society in which women were largely victimized by the common law of marriage.”⁴⁷ Yet, other scholars posit that English husbands continued to wield real power over their wives.⁴⁸ In Jamaica, both sexes used the equity and common law systems to their advantage.

Husbands countered equity with common law, asserting their patriarchal authority.

Women who married abusive, tyrannical, or profligate spouses had few legal options for dissolving their marriages. Little evidence exists in colonial court records for the possibility of legal divorce between unhappy partners. Yet, a few hints do appear. Some spouses found amicable remedies to marital strife by practicing self-divorce. Thomas and Mary Truxton, for instance, gave their “mutual consent” to live separately and “not to intermeddle with the affairs of each other.” Indeed, Thomas granted his wife permission to act as “a sole dealer without interruption.”⁴⁹ Though the two were still legally married, they devised a legal arrangement that allowed Mary to act as though she was single, transacting business and making her own will. Rather than exercising his power under coverture, Truxton helped his wife to achieve legal and financial independence.

Other husbands were far less cooperative, responding to marital discord by exerting their patriarchal authority. Peter Boreman provided his wife with a small £46 annuity and cut her off from “any other pretensions” to his estate. He ordered her “not to

⁴⁷ Erickson demonstrates that people used equity and ecclesiastical courts as alternatives to common law courts to protect married women’s material assets. Amy Louise Erickson, “Common law versus common practice: the use of marriage settlements in early modern England,” *Economic History Review* 43, no. 1 (1990): 21.

⁴⁸ Amanda Vickery notes that in Britain “wives were unequivocally subject to their husband’s authority, yet they also expected to be partners in the government of the family, and to have its daily management.” *Behind Closed Doors*, 193.

⁴⁹ Will of Mary Truxton, November 1, 1755, vol. 30, IRO.

dwelling, live, remain, or abide” on any of his properties after he died.⁵⁰ As husbands, these men had the ability to bar their wives from their property. In the absence of marriage settlements, common law empowered them to do so. When marital tensions escalated, some husbands took this prerogative one step further, and barred wives from the homes that they shared. In Britain, local communities defined the act of locking wives out of their houses as an “illegitimate abuse of power.” Yet, as Amanda Vickery reminds us, the lockout exposed the “tenuousness of a woman’s claim to the home.”⁵¹ Husbands could ignore the social norms that dictated acceptable behavior within marriage, while still being within the purview of common law.

The case of Nicholas and Rebecca Jacobson in 1709 exemplifies this point. Rebecca Jacobson filed suit in chancery against her husband, a tavern keeper, whom she claimed had “barbarously beat and wounded” her “without any of the least provocation or just cause” before turning her out of their house. She brought her case to chancery when common law left her “wholly without remedy...to enforce her husband to allow her any alimony.” Referring to commonplace notions of appropriate female behavior, Rebecca contrasted herself with her husband. She had, she asserted, “behaved herself as a loving and dutiful wife.” While her husband exerted his right to the marital home under coverture, he also “cruelly” took all of the “money slaves and all other things of value whatsoever” that his wife understood to be hers.⁵² Moreover, she had enlarged his estate to the value of £1,200 “by her own proper care pains and industry,” which she believed entitled her to “reasonable support” within a traditional understanding of marriage.

⁵⁰ Will of Peter Boreman, September 13, 1679, vol. 1, IRO.

⁵¹ Vickery, *Behind Closed Doors*, 200.

⁵² Rebecca Jacobson wife of Nicholas Jacobson, August 15, 1709, Chancery Court Records vol. 3, 1707-09, JA.

Jacobson alternated supposedly between disparaging his wife as “unjust and undutiful” and claiming “he was never married to her” as a means of avoiding financial responsibility. Rebecca Jacobson intermingled her concern about financial support with reports of physical and mental abuse, claiming her husband threatened to “breake her bones or cut of her leggs or armes” if she attempted to enter their house: she was a victim of excessively punitive masculine power, and could not “understand the reason” for her husband’s alleged “cruelty to her.” All in all, this case demonstrates that equity provided women with a means of mitigating the harsher aspects of coverture, but it did not erase the patriarchal power that men commanded in marriage, especially for women who took no measures to safeguard their property. It is foolhardy to embrace the egalitarian nature of early modern marriage and ignore the real legal and economic power men continued to assume within the relationship.

Inheritance and the Limits of Common Law

Death, however, could permanently alter men’s power. Alongside marriage, death brings the island’s shifting legal landscape into view. Death triggered inheritance, and the stakes of inheritance were especially high in a colony defined by escalating wealth and high mortality. As one scholar recently observed, inheritance was one of the strongest “social currents” shaping colonists’ lives.⁵³ The growth of slavery both increased the value of assets and influenced their distribution. This distribution of wealth generally occurred within a family, not an external marketplace, and a deceased person’s last will and testament was the legal document that engineered this reallocation. On their surface,

⁵³ Though Vincent Brown emphasizes the importance of inheritance to free and enslaved people, he focuses on a handful of free colonial elites. This chapter samples a much larger number of wills to identify broader inheritance patterns. *Reaper's Garden*, 92, 93.

early modern wills seem formulaic and often prosaic. Yet, a careful reading reveals Jamaicans' deepest emotional attachments, as well as their fears and desires for a future that the dead had little control over. Wills were literal expressions of the "will," or the power of authors: they reveal "personal intentions," in contrast with the "impersonal operation of the law."⁵⁴ As such, they were fit expressions of a hierarchical culture in which subordinates—women, children, servants, and slaves—were expected to submit to the "wills" of superiors. The will established the author's posthumous power, but also scripted a drama worthy of theater's golden age: one that would be acted out after the author's demise, according to the testator's particular directions. Even so, the living could be capricious creatures, and they often departed from assigned roles to pursue their own desires. Wills sparked disagreements over inheritance, and these disagreements frequently spilled out of the household and into the courts.

During the early modern period, the laws governing inheritance grew less restrictive. Originally, a testator had to bequeath one-third of his or her property to the Church and another one-third to the local lord. The passage of the Statute of Wills in the sixteenth century, and the removal of any remaining medieval restrictions on whom property could be devised to in 1692, gave individuals the legal right to allocate personal property to whomever they chose.⁵⁵ At this time, colonists showed a strong desire to provide for all family members, irrespective of gender. Free people structured bequests, as they did marriage, to be more equitable to women. The common law customs of dower, primogeniture, and entail all fell out of favor during the first half of the eighteenth

⁵⁴ Erickson, *Women & Property in Early Modern England*, 33.

⁵⁵ Daniel Livesay has written about how the change influenced bequests to people of color in Jamaica. "Children of Uncertain Fortune," 155.

century.⁵⁶ Wives and daughters received considerably larger grants of money, goods, land, and slaves. Not surprisingly, widespread changes in the English legal system influenced the gendered dimensions of inheritance in Anglo-America.⁵⁷ Historians have identified comparable inheritance patterns in Maryland, Virginia, and South Carolina. These colonies all possessed similar attributes to those of the mother country. Fewer free women, high mortality rates, and a growing slave population all resulted in an increase in women's financial and legal authority.⁵⁸ Jamaica was no exception. There, women controlled more wealth within families, and had more to bequeath when they died. Additionally, women overwhelmingly gave resources to other women, further increasing female affluence. A large portion of their affluence consisted of slaves. Inheritance played a major role in making women slaveholders. Colonists treated slaves as moveable goods or chattels—the traditional resources given to women. At the end of the seventeenth century slaves were becoming the most valuable assets passed on to female kin. This colonial custom increased during the eighteenth century, and the results were dramatic. By 1760, slaves constituted nearly half of the aggregate wealth held by free women. Additionally, slaves were of far greater value than the traditional offerings of

⁵⁶ 1,245 wills left by male and female colonists between 1661 and 1770 form the basis of the present chapter. Differences in scale, location and chronology of the wills sampled may account for the alternative conclusions reached by the author, Trevor Burnard, and Vincent Brown in regard to gender and status on the island. Brown argues, for instance, that “white women were rarely recognized as vital participants” in Jamaica. *Reaper's Garden*, 100. Burnard's study of 183 wills made by men in St. Andrews between 1667 and 1734 leads him to conclude that they were reluctant to “assign significant economic authority to their wives.” “Inheritance and Independence,” 106.

⁵⁷ For more on women and inheritance in Britain and early America see Erickson, *Women and Property*; Sturtz, *Within Her Power*; Carole Shammas, *Inheritance in America from Colonial Times to the Present* (New York: Frontier Press, 1997); Salmon, *Women and the Law of Property*.

⁵⁸ Lois Green Carr and Lorena Walsh argue that planter's wives in seventeenth-century Maryland received larger shares of their husband's estates because they were widowed at younger ages with more dependant children. “The Planter's Wife,” 542-71. See also Salmon, *Women and the Law of Property*; Lorri Glover, *All Our Relations: Blood Ties and Emotional Bonds Among the Early South Carolina Gentry* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2000). Richard Grassby reaches a similar conclusion from his study of 28,000 business families in Britain. *Kinship and Capitalism*.

furniture, livestock, and household goods women received. Slave ownership significantly augmented colonial women's resources. With wealth, free women commanded greater legal and social authority. Giving slaves to women, then, enhanced their autonomy in unforeseen ways.

Investing Authority in Wives

During the first century of settlement, husbands gradually devised a number of ways to enhance women's power to manage family estates. A sample of 504 men's wills made between 1661 and 1770 shows a strong preference for allocating more to wives than they were traditionally entitled to.⁵⁹ According to common law custom, widows received one-third of the family estate's value to use during their lifetimes: they did not have the legal right to bequeath their "widow's thirds" when they died. Dower ensured that wives would, at a minimum, have a place to live and a means of supporting themselves if husbands died. Of course, the smaller a family's estate, the scarcer a widow's resources. Coverture erased a woman's right to her property when she married, and dower prevented her from re-claiming the value of her original holdings. If a man died intestate, his wife would be left with limited authority over a family estate. In early modern England, equity remedies evolved out of the need to ensure that widows were adequately provided for, which dower did not guarantee. Couples established jointures, which entitled wives to annuities from land rental charges, instead of relying on dower.⁶⁰ Jamaicans, who also adopted these measures, went even further by transferring

⁵⁹ I sampled the wills left by men in one-year sequences for every decade between 1661 and 1770, and selected the wills made by men who gave substantial legacies to female relatives. Three-quarters (374) of the 504 wills were chosen because husbands or widowers made them.

⁶⁰ Erickson, *Women & Property in Early Modern England*, 25.

significant resources to widows. An estimated half of the 300 men who made specific bequests to wives gave them “all real and personal” property to own outright.⁶¹ James Bowen, for instance, left his entire estate to his wife, except for “his wearing apparel guns pistols & such other things as are only fit for a man's use.”⁶²

At the start of the eighteenth century, husbands explicitly gave testamentary bequests to wives “in lieu of” or “in bar of” dower, recognizing their abrogation of the common law precedent.⁶³ In 1700, Samuel Philips provided his wife with a £200 annuity, two enslaved women, and a coach and six horses—the epitome of conspicuous wealth in the early modern era.⁶⁴ She would also receive all of the profits generated by the family estate. Philips instructed his wife to “discharge in law” her dower; that is, relinquish her right to the third of the estate in order to receive a more substantial legacy.⁶⁵ Decades later, Richard Owen gave his wife Anna a similarly generous fortune. She would inherit not one, but two chariots, a riding horse, and jewels. Significantly, he returned to her “all personal estate she was possessed of or entitled to,” including her slaves, when they married, and gave her £2,222 in “full barr lieu and compensation of her dower and thirds.” Finally, she would receive half of the family estate (her daughter would inherit the other half).⁶⁶ A merchant in Kingston also gave his wife a chariot and several slaves, including a coachman and a cook, and a £1,185 legacy, stressing that the bequest was “in lieu and

⁶¹ 504 men's wills were surveyed for the present chapter: 141 of the 300 men whose wives were still living gave the majority of their estates to them (374 men were either husbands or widowers). *Jamaica Wills, 1661-1770*, vols. 1-38, IRO.

⁶² Will of James Elleston Bowen, February 21, 1769, “Abstracts of Jamaica Wills,” 1625–1792, Add. Mss., 34,181, BL.

⁶³ Out of 299 men who left detailed legacies for their wives, 34 specifically stated that their bequests were in lieu of dower. *Jamaica Wills, 1661-1770*, vols. 1-38, IRO.

⁶⁴ Amanda Vickery notes that a coach “was always ultra-expensive in itself, but the running of it demanded coachmen, postilions, horses, stables, feed, farriers...in modern terms the coach's equivalent would be less the proverbial sports car than a helicopter.” *Behind Closed Doors*, 124.

⁶⁵ Will of Samuel Philips, 1700, vol. 9, IRO.

⁶⁶ Will of Richard Owen, 1730, vol. 18, IRO.

barr of dower.”⁶⁷ By circumventing dower law, husbands recognized that wives needed more than a third of the family estate, especially if the couples were childless. Yet, Owen’s equal division of the family estate between wife and daughter, for instance, was typical of how men apportioned inheritance. Children did not necessarily mitigate larger bequests to wives.

Men like Philips, Owen, and Williams were intimately aware of how coverture and dower could circumscribe their wives’ rights to property, and took steps to override them. They were also relatively wealthy. Philips and Owens were both considered “Esquires,” a signal of both actual wealth and social aspiration. In each of their cases, the husbands gave the wives substantially more than the customary “widow’s thirds.” Philips’s wife would have a baseline income of £200, in addition to all of the annual profits of the family plantation; Owens’s would gain £2,222, in addition to ownership of half of the family estate; and Williams’s wife would earn £1,185. None of these women inherited enough to live like an aristocrat in England, who required £5,000 to £10,000 a year to maintain a proper household. However, some came close. Widows who had annuities totaling thousands of pounds easily surpassed that of middling and gentry British families, who existed on a few hundred pounds each year, and even the £1,042 average worth of a free white person in the British West Indies.⁶⁸ The £2 to £15 per annum income earned by women servants and housekeepers in eighteenth-century London further underscores how wealthy colonial women could become.⁶⁹

⁶⁷ Will of Hugh Williams, 1740, vol. 22, IRO.

⁶⁸ Vickery, *Behind Closed Doors*, 130; Brown, *Reaper's Garden*, 16.

⁶⁹ Housemaids earned between £2 and £8, while more skilled housekeepers could earn £15 per annum. Clive Emsley, Tim Hitchcock and Robert Shoemaker, “London History-Currency, Coinage and the Cost of Living,” *Old Bailey Proceedings Online*, version 7.0, March 20, 2014, www.oldbaileyonline.org.

Many factors contributed to the pattern of using testamentary dispositions to override dower and settle much more considerable estates on wives. Jamaicans commanded large assets, and had considerable resources to bequeath when they died. Planter families, for instance, often owned two houses: one located on a plantation and another in Spanish Town or Kingston. Furthermore, many families owned more than one plantation. Hence, many husbands had more than one property to divide between spouses and children—if any children survived. Children were more vulnerable to disease than adults, and couples were likely to lose them before adulthood.⁷⁰ In these scenarios, wives were the only close relatives to survive and inherit family estates. Married men were aware that their spouses were likely to outlive them. In the West Indies, men tended to marry at an older age than women, who generally survived longer.⁷¹ With this in mind, husbands wrote wills with the intention of providing for wives and children, often in perpetuity. It made sense for husbands to give spouses considerable financial and legal stakes in family estates. Men recognized that wives had the greatest interest in cultivating family resources and caring for children.

By designating their wives as executors, husbands further enhanced women's legal authority over family estates. Roughly three-quarters of the husbands studied in this chapter chose wives as executors, and half named them sole executors.⁷² An estate's management was entirely in the control of the sole executor: relatives, friends, and business partners could not interfere. The colonial preference for making wives executors contrasts with the trend in Britain of replacing wives with male relatives and business

⁷⁰ Burnard, "A Failed Settler Society": 67, 69-70.

⁷¹ Dunn, *Sugar and Slaves*, 332.

⁷² Of the 341 men who named wives in wills, 247 appointed them their executrixes. Men normally chose grown children or male friends to act as executors with wives. 178 of the 341 chose wives as "sole executrixes." Jamaica Wills, 1661-1770, vols. 1-38, IRO.

partners.⁷³ In Jamaica, husbands showed a strong desire to keep family wealth in the hands of the nearest relative, and high mortality rates meant that person was usually the wife. Husbands assumed wives to be fully competent in the management of a family's legal and financial affairs, and the most inclined to act advantageously for families. Assuming the role of executor was no small matter. The death of a spouse triggered a myriad of financial and legal transactions, which the executor was responsible for handling. She had to organize her husband's funeral, distribute the legacies in his will, and settle any lingering debts on the family's estate. Executors "stood at the center of transfers of wealth and, therefore, of status and social continuity" within families.⁷⁴ Successful widow-executors possessed the skills of attorneys, bookkeepers, and plantation overseers, while often caring for young children.⁷⁵ Tellingly, when Roger Hope Elletson—former Governor of Jamaica and owner of Hope Plantation—died, his wife Anna Eliza stepped in to act as his sole executor, immediately sending a letter with a copy of his will attesting that she was "devisee and sole executrix." She started calling Hope Plantation "my estate" and asked her husband's factors to manage it "in the same manner as you have acted for my late husband." In the years to come, Elletson herself became intimately involved in overseeing the plantation's affairs.⁷⁶

⁷³ Grassby finds that men were adding other men to jointly administer their wills. *Kinship and Capitalism*, 125.

⁷⁴ Brown, *Reaper's Garden*, 102.

⁷⁵ Grassby observes that, "liquidating a working business in seventeenth-century England demanded skill and knowledge." *Kinship and Capitalism*, 132.

⁷⁶ Anna Eliza Elletson, London to John Pool & Edward East, Jamaica, December 7, 1775, Stowe Brydges Correspondence (mssSTB), Box 25, HL.

Enriching Daughters

In addition to favoring wives, fathers made generous bequests of money, land, and slaves to daughters, which further enhanced women's economic, legal, and social standing during the early eighteenth century. Rather than favoring sons, fathers treated children with rough parity when they divvied up family estates. Amy Froide points out that the "focus on primogeniture in British history" has led to the assumption that men inherited real estate over women.⁷⁷ While far less work has been done to study inheritance in Jamaica, the findings here certainly support Froide's critique. The old common law traditions of primogeniture and entail-which dictated, respectively, that land and estate would pass to the eldest living son or eldest sons born to future generations-were not popular on the island. Parents followed the British precedent of treating children more equitably, forgoing yet another common law tradition that favored men. The aristocracy tended to employ primogeniture and entail to maintain a monopoly on property and titles.⁷⁸ However, the majority sought to provide sons and daughters with equal portions in the form of land and moveable goods.⁷⁹ In Jamaica, few fathers left family estates to eldest sons, and virtually none practiced entail. While one scholar has described primogeniture "as a guiding principle rather than as a rigid rule" in early nineteenth-century Jamaica, a century earlier it could hardly be considered even a "guiding principle."⁸⁰

⁷⁷ Froide, *Never Married*, 124.

⁷⁸ These practices consolidated political power into an exclusive, select group in Britain: only 220 men in England and Wales were members of the peerage by 1780. Vickery, *Behind Closed Doors*, 130.

⁷⁹ Erickson finds regional differences in the kinds of bequests made to sons and daughters in England but overall she concludes that most parents sought to balance bequests of land with moveables in order to support all of their children. She found no strong evidence of primogeniture playing a powerful role in the inheritance practices of ordinary people. Erickson, *Women & Property*, 68-71.

⁸⁰ Christer Petley cites as examples: John Cunningham (who died in 1812), who gave sugar plantations to his sons and £10,000 Jamaica current each to his daughters; John Coates, who divided his estate equally

Colonial parents preferred to distribute their estates evenly amongst children, regardless of gender and, in some cases, race. Local conditions made the lives of all free children precious. Young people were particularly susceptible to the pernicious effects of the diseases and illnesses that ravaged the island's population. High mortality rates winnowed males from the ranks of inheritors, and parents frequently had only daughters left when they made inheritance decisions. Furthermore, Jamaican families were wealthy from their slave ownership, and had comparatively more resources to bestow upon children than British parents. Fathers accordingly had the comfort to allocate more family resources more equitably among children, seeking to support all young people who survived into adulthood.

Instead of adhering to a single practice, fathers tailored children's legacies to the specific needs of families. Three-quarters of all fathers who made bequests to children named daughters in their wills.⁸¹ If fathers had both sons and daughters, estates were generally divided equally between children regardless of gender or age. Planter Robert Cole, for instance, instructed his executors to give equal portions of his real and personal estate to son and daughter in his 1748 will, and asked his wife to "cloath and maintain" the children in a "decent but not extravagant manner."⁸² John Jones, a blacksmith by trade, left four slaves to his son, and his "stock, mares, horses, a negro boy" and household goods to his daughter. He ordered his children to share the family land equally.⁸³

between six children; and Charles Gordon Gray, who divided his property equally between wife and children. "'Legitimacy' and Social Boundaries," 494.

⁸¹ Of the 274 men who made bequests to their children, 204 fathers named daughters. *Jamaica Wills, 1661-1770*, vols. 1-38, IRO.

⁸² Will of Robert Cole, 1748, vol. 27, IRO.

⁸³ Will of John Jones, 1730, vol. 18, IRO.

Bequests to children varied greatly, making it difficult to discern a singular gendered pattern in the types of resources given by fathers.⁸⁴ Some fathers gave money and slaves to daughters, while transferring property to sons. In 1710, Planter Thomas Waite did exactly this, setting aside £370 and a “negro girl” for his daughter, while reserving the family estate for his son.⁸⁵ Real estate, however, was an unstable legacy. Sons could end up land rich and cash poor, whereas daughters who inherited cash, annuities, and slaves usually gained immediate access to disposable income.⁸⁶ Personal property, especially in the form of slaves, was a more “flexible and practice inheritance” that women could quickly turn into money.⁸⁷ Real estate could not be converted into liquid assets so readily. On the island, the stage of an estate’s development also determined its value. Unsettled land or newer plantations required significant capital investments in slaves and equipment. Even after initial investment, plantations could take years to achieve full profitability. Older estates could be saddled with debt. Real estate was therefore not always a secure or practical means of support.

Furthermore, fathers sometimes favored daughters over sons. Harding Goodin, a planter in Westmoreland, appointed his widowed daughter as his executor, and showered her with £370, furniture, bonds, cash, and the profits from his plantation during her widowhood. He also released her from all of the debts she and her late husband owed to him.⁸⁸ In contrast, Goodin gave fifteen pence to his two sons and did not invite either of

⁸⁴ It would be fruitful to compare wills with probated inventories and land deeds if these documents existed for a number of individuals in order to make these valuations. However, such analysis is beyond the scope of the present project.

⁸⁵ Will of Thomas Waite, 1710, vol. 13, IRO.

⁸⁶ Parents set different ages as the “age of maturity” in wills: some allowed children to inherit at sixteen, and some at twenty-one. Gender generally did not play a role in determining the age of maturity.

⁸⁷ Froide, *Never Married*, 128-129.

⁸⁸ Will of Harding Goodin, 1740, vol. 22, IRO.

them to act as his executors.⁸⁹ Near the end of the eighteenth century, Thomas Tomlinson gave his son £7 and the rest of his estate to his daughter.⁹⁰ Similarly, the blacksmith William Shearer gave his son £3.6, the remainder of the family estate going to his wife and daughter.⁹¹ Of course, some fathers might have given larger bequests to daughters because sons had already been provided for with *inter vivos* (life time) gifts, or stood to inherit legacies from other relatives. But this does not seem to be the case for Goodin, Tomlinson, or Shearer, who gave their entire estates to daughters and even excluded sons from acting as executors.

The personal needs of children and their emotional connections (or the lack thereof) to fathers played a far greater role than gender in determining the size and contents of legacies they received. Generally speaking, fathers were more likely to provide daughters with an inheritance because they tended to outlive sons. Men's wills indicate that girls were more likely to survive into adulthood, or that parents had more daughters than sons. Three-quarters of all fathers studied had daughters, and one-third of these fathers had only daughters.⁹² Girls accordingly inherited considerable portions of family estates. Those who had no male siblings received especially favorable legacies. Fathers like John McNeal, who had one daughter, gave her £1,428 and requested that she be "maintained and educated...handsomely and genteely in manner suitable to someone of her fortune" in his 1750 will.⁹³ Physician, planter, and slave trader Fulke Rose, a father

⁸⁹ Will of Richard Owen, 1730, vol. 18, IRO.

⁹⁰ Will of Thomas Tomlinson, 1770, vol. 38, IRO.

⁹¹ Will of Richard Shearer, 1770, vol. 38, IRO.

⁹² It is difficult to know whether the daughters mentioned in wills outlived their fathers. Furthermore, other factors may have influenced men's decisions to give daughters legacies. Perhaps it was an unspoken assumption in many families that sons would inherit considerable portions of estates. The majority of the evidence presented in this chapter does not, however, support such a hypothesis.

⁹³ Will of John McNeal, 1750, vol. 27, IRO.

of three girls, died a wealthy man sixty years before.⁹⁴ He left each generous portions: Elizabeth received Knowlles Plantation; Anne inherited Mickleton Plantation and other Jamaican properties; and Mary, the youngest, property in Jamaica and England. Each child also received lands and houses in Spanish Town.⁹⁵

Concentrating Women's Wealth

Women's practices complemented and often amplified men's decisions to give larger legacies to wives and daughters, further concentrating wealth in female hands. Unmarried women who possessed money, land, and slaves also had the legal right to bequeath these resources upon others. Between 1665 and 1757, 741 women made wills.

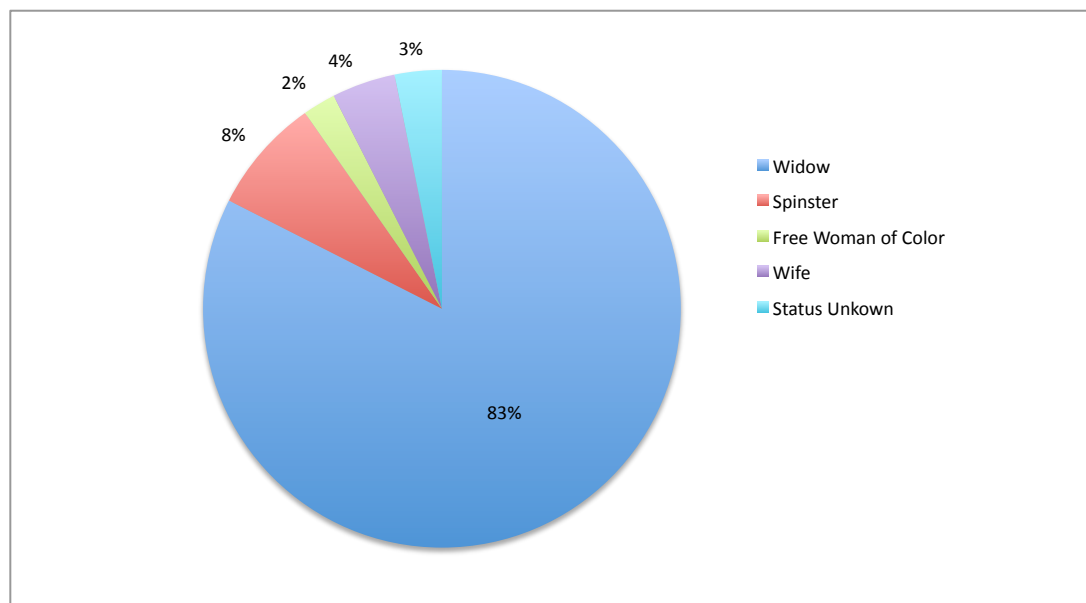


Figure 3.2. Marital Status of Women Will-Makers, 1665-1757.

⁹⁴ Fulke Rose imported large numbers of Royal African Company slaves to Jamaica during the 1670s. James Delbourgo, "Sir Hans Sloane's Milk Chocolate and the Whole History of the Cacao," 75.

⁹⁵ Fulke Rose also noted that his wife, Elizabeth, was pregnant in his 1691 will and ordered that if she gave birth to a son, he would inherit the bulk of the estate. Will of Fulke Rose, June 17, 1691, "Abstracts of Jamaica Wills, 1625-1792," Add. Mss., 34,181, BL.

The large majority of the women who made wills identified themselves as widows. It makes sense that widows left the most wills. First, as widows, they held the authority to make wills outright, unlike married women who required the permission of husbands or separate estates to do so. Second, many had children whom they needed to provide for, and whose inheritance required safeguarding. Finally, having been married, widows were likely to control larger estates comprising holdings they received from husbands and parents. While spinsters also had the legal right to make wills, fewer did so. Perhaps the disparity between widows and spinsters shows us how likely free white women were to marry at least once in the colony, leaving fewer spinsters. Or perhaps spinsters' resources were more meager, although the considerable legacies parents gave to daughters does not support such a conclusion.⁹⁶ Twenty women identified themselves by their occupations, as men did, rather than marital status. They worked as tavern keepers, midwives, planters, schoolmistresses, and seamstresses. Census records do not provide enough detail about the free population to show whether widows made up the majority of the single women on the island, but they conclusively comprised the majority of female will-makers.

None of the women identified by marital status and occupation referred to their race, which suggests the majority were white. However, people navigated and elided racial categories during this time. Fourteen women of color identified themselves as “negro” or “mulatto.” Their race was assumed to be the most salient aspect of identity. While women of color could legally make wills, few did so. Marriage between white men and women of color was typically frowned upon, though not illegal. Additionally, many free people of color, especially in the first half of the eighteenth century, were freed

⁹⁶ Amy Froide also shows that spinsters, or singlewomen in early modern England received considerable legacies from parents and continued to prosper throughout their lives. They were not pauperized as has been assumed. *Never Married*, 118.

slaves. Possessing more modest property when they died, women of African descent may have seen less reason in making wills. White widows, therefore, comprised the majority of female will-makers, suggesting that race and marital status influenced, but did not determine, a woman's material life. Inventories of women's estates support this pattern. Almost three-quarters of the women whose estates were probated were widowed and probably white.

The majority of the female testators further concentrated wealth in women's hands by giving estates to female relations and friends. As a result, family estates were commonly controlled by successive generations of women. Women overwhelmingly preferred female legatees, regardless of whether males survived to inherit.⁹⁷ More than a third of the women who made bequests to immediate family members gave entire estates, or at least substantial portions, to female relatives.⁹⁸ Three-quarters of all of the women who made gifts to relatives left something to a female relative. Women's bequests to friends adhered to a similar pattern: seventy percent of those who offered legacies to friends made gifts to female friends.⁹⁹ Some women were quite explicit about this partiality. Mary Bradshaw, a widow from Kingston, conferred her estate upon her mother and ordered that it be passed on to another "female kinswoman" when the mother died.¹⁰⁰

⁹⁷ Women's preferential treatment of female relatives and friends may offer evidence of a longstanding tradition of same sex favoritism in bequests. It would be interesting to know if women who lived elsewhere in the British Empire displayed similar patterns of behavior.

⁹⁸ Of the 741 women who left wills, 558 women made bequests to blood relatives. Of the 558, 201 left most of their estates to female relations. An additional 41 percent (234) made bequests to female relations as well as male relations. Three-quarters (435) of the women made bequests to other women in their families. *Jamaica Wills, 1665 to 1757*, vols. 1-31, IRO.

⁹⁹ Of the 280 women who left legacies to extended kin and friends, 195 left something to a woman, and 41 gave their entire estates to distant female relations or to female friends. This number does not take into account the number of women from this group who left the majority of their inheritance to female kin who were part of a woman's immediate family. The remaining 30 percent left their estates to close male friends who were single, and possibly romantic partners. *Jamaica Wills, 1665 to 1757*, vols. 1 to 31, IRO.

¹⁰⁰ Will of Mary Bradshaw, 1700, vol. 9, IRO.

Like fathers, colonial mothers used equity measures to override the British traditions of primogeniture and entail, and sought to provide children with equivalent legacies.¹⁰¹ If mothers only had sons, they usually divided family estates equally amongst them, regardless of birth order. Moreover, mothers who had children of both sexes did not display a partiality for sons. Some mothers divided estates equally amongst children, giving land to sons and money and slaves to daughters, as fathers commonly did. However, mothers more often made larger bequests to daughters than to sons. Elizabeth Lambert gave her “worldly goods and chattels” to three daughters, yet left instructions for her executors to rent out her sugar plantation to support all four children, including a son. He inherited nothing else from her.¹⁰² Widow Sarah Noke gave slaves to her son and her two daughters, but only one daughter stood to inherit the estate.¹⁰³ Mary Compere directed her three daughters to share ownership of her plantation as tenants in common, while she only provided her son with an annual annuity out of the plantation’s profits.¹⁰⁴

Widows in Jamaica, who were often granted ownership of family estates outright, held even greater authority to devise estates as they chose to. A number of mothers cut their sons out of family inheritance entirely. Perhaps they did so because sons already stood to inherit or had already received legacies from deceased fathers. Ann Peschaire offered five shillings to her son Christopher, while her daughter Susannah would inherit two enslaved women and the rest of her estate.¹⁰⁵ Similarly, Judith Pastana gave each of

¹⁰¹ For more on parents’ inheritance practices in early America, see Lori Glover, *All Our Relations*; Jean B. Lee, “Land and Labor: Parental Bequest Practices in Charles County, Maryland, 1732-1783,” *Colonial Chesapeake Society*, eds. Lois Green Carr, Philip D. Morgan, and Jean B. Russo (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1988), 306-41.

¹⁰² Will of Elizabeth Lambert, 1679, vol. 9, IRO.

¹⁰³ Will of Sarah Noke, 1742, vol. 23, IRO.

¹⁰⁴ Will of Mary Compere, 1744, vol. 24, IRO.

¹⁰⁵ Will of Ann Peschaire, 1747, vol. 26, IRO.

her sons five shillings and made her daughter Sarah sole heir to her estate.¹⁰⁶ Mary George's son would only be given a mourning ring when she died, while her daughter would inherit the rest of her personal estate.¹⁰⁷ However, strained relations between parents and children could also result in mothers cutting sons out of inheritance. Dorothy Williams gave her son £37 in gold and another £37 in silver, and warned him that "if he ever disturb or molest my daughter...in her goods chattels or estate, that legacy for him will be void." Williams gave her daughter the remainder of the estate.¹⁰⁸

Grandmothers and aunts, like mothers, regularly made more favorable bequests to younger female relations. Joan Ennoome, a widow in Spanish Town, chose to give £3,077 to her granddaughter instead of her grandson, who would receive nothing unless his sister died.¹⁰⁹ Mary Elding left only £36 to her son "in full barr of any claim" to her estate. Her daughter, who lived in Barbados, would receive a paltry £7.1. In contrast, Elding's granddaughters each inherited five slaves, along with the remainder of her estate.¹¹⁰ Sarah Gregory left the bulk of her estate to her daughter, and only specified legacies for granddaughters, not grandsons. Granddaughter Alice would inherit two slaves, and her "spinster" granddaughters would each inherit one mare.¹¹¹ Jane Bodie gave three slaves and the rest of her estate to her three granddaughters.¹¹²

More often than not, practical considerations, rather than family conflicts, shaped women's bequests. Women did not possess an innate partiality for female kin. Instead, they considered who in the family was most in need of resources. In favoring daughters,

¹⁰⁶ Will of Judith Pastana, 1726, vol. 17, IRO.

¹⁰⁷ Will of Mary George, 1749, vol. 27, IRO.

¹⁰⁸ Will of Dorothy Williams, 1731, vol. 18, IRO.

¹⁰⁹ Will of Joan Ennoome, April 12, 1721, "Abstracts of Jamaica Wills, 1625–1792," Add. Mss., 34,181, BL.

¹¹⁰ Will of Mary Elding, 1748, vol. 26, IRO.

¹¹¹ Will of Sarah Gregory, 1752, vol. 28, IRO.

¹¹² Will of Jane Bodle, 1746, vol. 25, IRO.

widows adhered to British custom, wherein mothers used inheritance to look out for younger, female, and single children. Indeed, one of the purposes of women's wills was to "lessen the unequal effects of primogeniture" on a family's other children.¹¹³ Husbands supported married daughters, and sons could support themselves by pursuing careers, or with legacies given to them by other relations. Additionally, women—like men—preferred giving estates to close blood relatives rather than distant male heirs and, in doing so, prioritized the interests of immediate families who lived in the colony. Though rarely mentioned in wills, emotional attachments also undoubtedly influenced women's bequests. Women were likely to spend more time with daughters, granddaughters, and nieces, leading to greater commonality with and affection for female kin. Such bonds, as much as practical concerns, colored women's inheritance decisions, even if the legal rhetoric of wills cloaked such emotional influences.

A rare collection of correspondence, amassed by Sarah Shanks, illuminates how mothers chose to allocate family resources among children. Shanks, a widow who moved between Jamaica and Bristol, had three children: Mary, William ("Billy"), and Anna. In her 1739 will, Shanks left Mary £71 to purchase mourning clothing, named Anna her sole executrix—giving her the majority of the estate—and failed to mention Billy entirely.¹¹⁴ Shanks's letters to her three children shed light on why she did what she did.¹¹⁵ Mary, her eldest daughter, was already married to a Jamaican physician who presumably supported her. As a wife, Mary was also subject to coverture, and her husband would ultimately have power over anything that she inherited from her mother. On the other hand, Billy was a prodigal: a drunkard who frequently disappeared. Anything Shanks gave to him

¹¹³ Froide, *Never Married*, 119.

¹¹⁴ Will of Sarah Shanks, 1739, vol. 23, IRO.

¹¹⁵ Account Book and Letters of Sarah Shanks, 1736-1741, GD 1/32/33, NAS.

would be spent on alcohol. That left Shanks's youngest daughter. Anna was her mother's constant companion. Mother and daughter had travelled to Britain and back again. Shanks felt closer to her as a result. Furthermore, Anna was a young single woman, described as a "spinster" in legal documents.¹¹⁶ She needed her mother's financial support more than her sister Mary, and deserved it more than Billy. As the heir to her mother's estate, Anna would be not only more attractive to potential suitors, but also more capable of supporting herself financially if Shanks died.¹¹⁷ It made both practical and emotional sense for Shanks to make Anna the executrix. Furthermore, Anna would be able to manage the Shanks estate independently as long as she remained unmarried.

Wealthy women were not the only ones to favor female kin. Women in all levels of society displayed a partiality for same-sex bequests. A poorer woman named Esther Tacey had only fourteen sheep and two slaves to pass on to her family. She chose to give the sheep to her daughter, and the slaves to her granddaughter.¹¹⁸ Free women of African descent also preferred to give most of their resources to other female relations, even if family members were still enslaved. Sarah Harrison, a "free Negro Woman" living in St. Catherine, made bequests to several generations of females in her family, though many were still enslaved. She gave her enslaved daughter Sarah wearing apparel, household goods, and furniture. She was also one of the few women who survived to make bequests to great grandchildren, and offered a silver spoon to each of her possibly enslaved great granddaughters; one of the great granddaughters also received "one large Mahogany chest with a drawer in it and one small Iron Pott." To her enslaved sister, Nanny,

¹¹⁶ Amy Froide discusses the social, legal and economic distinctions between widows and "spinsters," or single women who never married. *Never Married*, 15-43.

¹¹⁷ Anna Shanks married a wealthy business merchant named Arthur Hassall in 1748: the same year that her mother died.

¹¹⁸ Will of Esther Tacey, 1742, vol. 23, IRO.

Harrison bequeathed a white waistcoat and a red striped petticoat. Harrison named “free negroes” James Moore and John Barisoon her executors. Indeed, the will reveals the existence of a community of free people of color in St. Catherine who maintained close ties to enslaved family members in the area.

Sarah Sparks was another free woman of color who sought to provide for enslaved relations. Sparks only gave free daughters Penelope and Dorothy twenty shillings and wearing apparel, but she did so to use the rest of her estate, worth £36, to purchase “the liberty and freedom” of her enslaved son Robert Sparks and set aside something “towards his commencement of a livelihood.” Sparks selected Mary Slicker, a close female friend, as her executrix. Slicker was to purchase Robert’s freedom. If Slicker could not, then she was to redirect the money towards the care of her free daughters.¹¹⁹ Like most women, Sarah Harrison and Sarah Sparks used bequests to alleviate specific family circumstances. Free women of color offered gifts to enslaved kin to ameliorate and in some cases remove the conditions of slavery.

Prospering From Slavery

On average, slaves, more than any other asset, directly increased the value of the bequests given to women. Slavery turned human beings into assets, and women benefited significantly from the influx of this new resource into families. Indeed, the rapid growth of slavery in the colony, which began in the late seventeenth century, profoundly altered the nature of inheritance itself, driving a more radical move away from common law traditions towards an approach that enshrined the rights of the individual property holder irrespective of gender. Common law practices were ill suited to handle the new property

¹¹⁹ Will of Sarah Sparks, August 17, 1743, vol. 24, IRO.

demands of a society that revolved around slaveholding. As men grew richer through the use of slave labor, they had more money to lavish upon spouses and children. In addition to this indirect benefit, women benefited directly: more than half of all men who left legacies to wives gave slaves.¹²⁰ In the first half of the eighteenth century, the exact legal definition of a slave as property was still being formulated. Colonists exhibited an understanding of slaves as chattel or personal estate—rather than as real estate—when making bequests, groupings slaves together with the furniture, livestock, and plate. Their interpretation paralleled colonial acts passed in 1683, which grouped “negroes” with cattle, horses, and “utensils.”¹²¹ In 1740, a new colonial law stated that slaves were to be “accounted” for and sold as chattel to pay for debts.¹²² Women, who traditionally inherited personal property or “moveable” goods, benefited from the legal definition of slaves as personal estate.

Furthermore, wives customarily managed servants in British households and, unsurprisingly, in Jamaican households as well. Vesting wives with legal authority over domestic slaves—whether cooks, laundresses, seamstresses, or coachmen—made sense: they fell within the purview of the wife who typically managed the household work. Husbands who already depended upon spouses to oversee slaves sought to ensure they would continue in this capacity. Nor were widows who inherited slaves from deceased husbands first-time slave owners. In Jamaica, it was customary for women to receive slaves from parents upon reaching the age of majority. If a woman married, her husband

¹²⁰ Of the 300 men who made more detailed bequests to wives, ninety-three specifically gave slaves. It is also possible slaves were included in the “real and personal” estates passed on to wives in less descriptive wills. We can conservatively estimate that at least half of all of the women who received bequests from their spouses were given slaves. *Jamaica Wills, 1661-1770*, vols. 1-38, IRO.

¹²¹ *Laws of Jamaica*, ff. 182-188.

¹²² Leslie, *A New History of Jamaica*, 218.

would assume legal ownership of these slaves during his lifetime, though she continued to oversee them. If he later died, that property might return to the wife, and serve as future means of support.

Husbands fostered wives' direct engagement with the slave economy, leaving instructions for them to buy, sell, and employ slaves, and often how to do so. James Parker, a self-described gentleman from Halfway Tree, transferred the ownership of eleven slaves to his wife Margaret in 1710. Assuming legal ownership of these slaves enmeshed her in a complex array of financial transactions. The slaves were chargeable for a debt that her husband owed. Once she cleared the debt, she could (under the terms of the will) sell the slaves and use the proceeds to finance a move to England. Money from the sale of the slaves could also fund the couples' mortgage on a tavern called the "Fox & Goose" that they were building in London.¹²³ Parker recommended that his wife keep "one negro with her to wait on her for the voyage" to England. Thus, Margaret's slaves would provide her with the capital to leave Jamaica and to begin life anew in the "Fox and Goose" after her husband died. Twenty years later, Charles Price provided his wife Sarah the "labor and service of several negro & other slaves." He empowered her to "ship off to the Spanish Coast or elsewhere all & every such slave" that she "shall think deserve punishment," and instructed her to purchase more slaves "for the better carrying on and advancement of my estate."¹²⁴ He assumed Sarah knew how to manage, punish, buy and sell slaves.

Men who transferred legal ownership of slaves to wives intensified female participation in a slaveholding society, vesting in them financial, legal, and social interest

¹²³ Will of James Parker, 1710, vol. 13, IRO.

¹²⁴ Will of Charles Price, 1730, vol. 18, IRO.

in slavery. Such a strategy was not limited to wealthy colonists. Married men from all walks of life gave slaves to wives as labor and financial support. For instance: John Frazier, a bricklayer, left slaves to his wife in 1748 and expected her to hire them out to support the couple's children. Moreover, he ordered her to sell land that he had recently purchased in order to buy more slaves. Yet, like Parker, John Frazier instructed his wife to sell the family slaves if she left the island.¹²⁵ Nicholas Redkey, a shoemaker from St. Catherine, gave his wife two slaves in 1740 to make use of during her lifetime, along with his house in Spanish Town, "in full lieu and barr of dower."¹²⁶ Such practice of giving slaves to wives crossed racial boundaries. Goody Jacobson, a "free negro" butcher in Port Royal, gave his wife two enslaved women, along with the rest of his estate.¹²⁷ Though it is unclear if Jacobson was born into slavery, he and free people of African descent owned slaves. Like white husbands, he chose to pass them on to his wife, co-opting her in the slave system that had brought his family to the island in chains.

Wives were not the only family members to inherit slaves. During the first half of the eighteenth century, it became commonplace for fathers to bequeath slaves to daughters as well. Such practice further increased women's dependence upon slave labor and strengthened the connection between women's slave-ownership and their wealth. Roughly half of all fathers who made bequests to daughters specifically mentioned slaves as part of the bequests, and this estimate does not account for the slaves included in less descriptive bequests of "real and personal estates" to girls.¹²⁸ Realistically, three-quarters of all daughters who received gifts from fathers received slaves—strikingly similar in

¹²⁵ Will of John Frazier, 1748, vol. 27, IRO.

¹²⁶ Will of Nicholas Redkey, 1740, vol. 22, IRO.

¹²⁷ Will of Goody Jacobson, 1724, vol. 16, IRO.

¹²⁸ Of 204 men who left legacies for their daughters, 94 men specifically identified slaves as part of such legacies. Jamaica Wills, 1661-1770, vols. 1-38, IRO.

number to the half of all wives who received slaves from husbands. By the end the seventeenth century, Jamaican men were providing daughters with slaves. In 1678, for instance, the planter Joel White gave his daughter all his plantations and “twenty and seven old and young negroes, thirteen horses and mares and five colts.”¹²⁹ Twenty-two years later, James Leller outlined in great detail the personal property that his daughter Dorcas would inherit, including £560, a silver tankard engraved with the initials “CS,” a silver sugar box engraved with “MD,” her mother’s wedding ring, and “one negroe girl Savannah by name.”¹³⁰ At about the same time, surgeon Edward Smith gave his estate to his wife but forbade her to sell any of the family slaves who would all descend to their daughters.¹³¹ Finally, a decade later, planter Francis Flowaires bequeathed land to all of his children. In addition to real estate, he gave each of his own daughters four enslaved children.¹³²

It appears as though parents on every level of society gave slaves to daughters. Prudence Gale stood to inherit £800, a house, and four slaves from her father, who worked as a carpenter in Port Royal.¹³³ Samuel Hinton, a Kingston tavern keeper, passed on nine enslaved men and two women, along with seven boys and four girls, to his daughter.¹³⁴ Physician Peter Symons willed two enslaved women each to his two daughters: both girls were to assume ownership of the slaves when they either turned sixteen or got married.¹³⁵ Fathers’ identifying slaves assigned to daughters by name probably indicates that the slaves were already living with the families. But fathers also

¹²⁹ Will of Joel White, 1678, vol. 1, IRO.

¹³⁰ Will of James Leller, 1700, vol. 1, IRO.

¹³¹ Will of Edward Smith, 1699, vol. 6, IRO.

¹³² Will of Francis Flowaires, 1710, vol. 13, IRO.

¹³³ Will of John Gale, 1699, vol. 9, IRO.

¹³⁴ Will of Samuel Hinton, 1730, vol. 18, IRO.

¹³⁵ Will of Peter Symons, 1730, in *ibid*.

set aside money for the purchase of “new” slaves for daughters. Edward Phips gave his daughter £222 and instructed his executors to use the money to purchase “choice new negroes two men and two women to be bought for her” with the money, as well as “a new negro girl to wait on her.”¹³⁶ William Farrell gave his daughter Mary a slave girl and asked his executors to use £74 to buy her more “new negroes.” Even infants inherited slaves. Farrell set aside £74 and a slave girl to an infant daughter who was “not christened” but whom he desired “may be called Sarah at her baptism.”¹³⁷ Similarly, the infant Elizabeth Wright inherited forty acres of woodland, ten acres of savannah land, ten heifers, £37, and two slaves when her father died; her father’s executors were urged to purchase two boys for her, as well.¹³⁸ All of the individual bequests made by colonists had the cumulative effect of increasing the demand for more African slaves, men, women and children to the colony.

Throughout life, slaves figured as a primary form of currency to convey wealth along female lines for women, as well as for men. Women who gave slaves to other women were central not only to the continuance of slavery but also to its expansion. Mercy Bars gave only five slaves to her son, while she bequeathed several families of slaves to her daughter.¹³⁹ Though Catherine Byndloss was still married, her husband gave his consent to her writing a separate will in order to bequeath “my slaves whereof I am seized in my own right.” Like Bars, Byndloss gave one enslaved man to her son Henry, whereas she devised a slave, Betty, Betty’s three daughters, and another woman named Quasheba to her daughter. Byndloss gave her other daughter, Mary, an enslaved mother

¹³⁶ Will of Edward Phips, 1740, vol. 22, IRO.

¹³⁷ Will of William Farrell, 1740, vol. 22, IRO.

¹³⁸ Will of Nathaniel Wright, 1740, in *ibid.*

¹³⁹ Ricketts inherited a “family in number seven,” a second “family” of two slaves, to which were added a third “family” of five. Will of Mercy Bars, 1720, vol. 15, IRO.

and daughter.¹⁴⁰ Since her son possibly stood to inherit the majority of his father's estate, she used her slaves as an alternative means of support for daughters: one more readily accessible in Jamaica than nearly anywhere else in British America.

Women who defined slaves as “gifts” and legacies categorically abstracted people into financial assets. They were involved in embedding slaves in a legal rhetoric and practice that sought to alienate them from their personhood. Dorothy Watson, a widow who operated a business in “trade” with her sister in Kingston, gave her sister her “half part and share in two negro women slaves which we bought between us named Marina and Belinda.”¹⁴¹ The sisters must have pooled their money together to purchase the women. Not only did they buy slaves, the sisters also treated them as commodities that could be divided in “half” or into “shares.” Watson additionally gave a legacy to a female relation in Philadelphia “to buy her a negro in lieu of a runaway negro I sold being almost blind and was afterward lost,” exposing the Atlantic connections between women slaveholders. Like Watson, many women made gifts of money to relations for the purchase of “new negroes”—that is, of slaves who had recently arrived from Africa. Widow Bonny Tamasin gave £59 to her granddaughter Elizabeth Savory to be “laid out in negroes.”¹⁴² In making such bequests, women actively increased the demand for slaves to be imported to the colony, and helped to expand Jamaica's dependence on the slave trade.

Slave distribution and ownership spanned the social spectrum. Poorer women held one or two slaves, while others owned fifty. Martha Hughes was a widowed mantua-maker from Kingston who possessed three “Indian and negro slaves.” When she married

¹⁴⁰ Will of Catherine Byndloss, 1728, vol. 17, IRO.

¹⁴¹ Will of Dorothy Watson, 1727, vol. 19, IRO.

¹⁴² Will of Tamasin Bonny, 1727, vol. 17, IRO.

her second husband, she asserted full ownership of the slaves and maintained her right to bequeath them. Equity, as we have seen earlier, provided her with the means to do so.¹⁴³ Any free person, male or female, who could scrape together enough money to buy a slave, did so in Jamaica. Nor was race a barrier to slave ownership. Free women of African descent also owned and bequeathed slaves. Their participation in slavery was evident early on in the eighteenth century. Elizabeth Keyhorne, a free woman of color, gave her four daughters “now being slaves” all of her wearing apparel. Having children who were still enslaved intimated Keyhorne’s recent freedom. While her daughters were slaves, her son Joseph was free and worked as a joyner in Kingston. Keyhorne gave him “four negro slaves.” It is even possible that the four slaves she bequeathed to him were her daughters—his sisters—and that she sought to keep the family intact by placing them in his care.¹⁴⁴ Like Keyhorne, Sarah Harrison, a “free Negro Woman,” instructed her executors to sell her slave Flora, and divide the profits from the sale between her four children who remained enslaved and “belonged” to another man. The wills left by free women of color reveal how slavery wove its way through families in paradoxical ways. All free women had a vested interest in slavery. Perhaps women just a few degrees removed from bondage had even more of a reason to own slaves. Not only did such women enrich themselves, but they also emphasized their status as free, in contrast with those whom they commanded.

While free women’s fortunes never approached the fantastical wealth accrued by men like William Beckford and Simon Taylor, they nevertheless derived increasingly

¹⁴³ Will of Martha Hughes, 1741, vol. 23, IRO.

¹⁴⁴ Will of Elizabeth Keyhorne, 1713, vol. 14, IRO.

significant material benefits from the colony over the course of the eighteenth century.¹⁴⁵ The richest women owned hundreds of slaves and held vast tracts of land. By the 1760s Spinster Sarah Haughton, for instance, oversaw 283 slaves and had an estate worth £17,537 (1.6 million pounds today). Widow Mary Wait from Port Royal had 336 slaves and an estate valued at over £11,428 (1.4 million pounds today).¹⁴⁶ Additionally, since neither woman was married, each could bequeath her fortune as she chose. Haughton and Wait were exceptional, of course, but they were members of a new class of wealthy colonists from Jamaica whose fortunes surpassed those of anyone else in the empire, including the nobility in Britain. By the middle of the eighteenth century, no other American colony could rival Jamaica's economic and strategic importance to the empire, or the financial and political power of its constituents in London.¹⁴⁷

Colonial wills offer one means of assessing the considerable resources women controlled by the late eighteenth century. Probated inventories of women's estates yield a more exacting report on female wealth. Probate inventories were created when a person died, but did not leave a will.¹⁴⁸ Figure 3.1 plots a total of 1,188 inventories of women's estates probated between 1674 and 1784.¹⁴⁹ During this 110-year period, the number of probated estates owned by Jamaican women increased each year by more than twenty-fold. The gradual but steady expansion of the free population partially accounts for this:

¹⁴⁵ For a complete list of the wealthiest men in Jamaica, see Burnard, *Planters, Merchants, and Slaves*, 223-225.

¹⁴⁶ Inventory of Sarah Haughton, 1767, and Inventory of Mary Wait, 1761, JA. The site *Measuring Worth* was used to calculate contemporary values of women's estates (retail price index).

¹⁴⁷ Burnard, *Planters, Merchants, and Slaves*, 221. Perry Gauci charts the phenomenal rise of William Beckford's political influence in Britain: *William Beckford*.

¹⁴⁸ A probate account offers a "snapshot" of an estate after all the debts have been settled. Probates were normally filed one year after a person died. Erickson, *Women & Property*, 34.

¹⁴⁹ The data for this graph was obtained from the 1,188 inventories of women's estates that were proved between 1674 and 1784. The numbers were taken from a database of inventories created by Trevor Burnard who granted the author permission to use his data. Jamaica Inventories, 1674-1784, JA.

in 1788 the free population was three and a half times larger than it was in 1693.¹⁵⁰ But the growth rate of the population did not come close to matching the growth rate of free women's estate holdings.

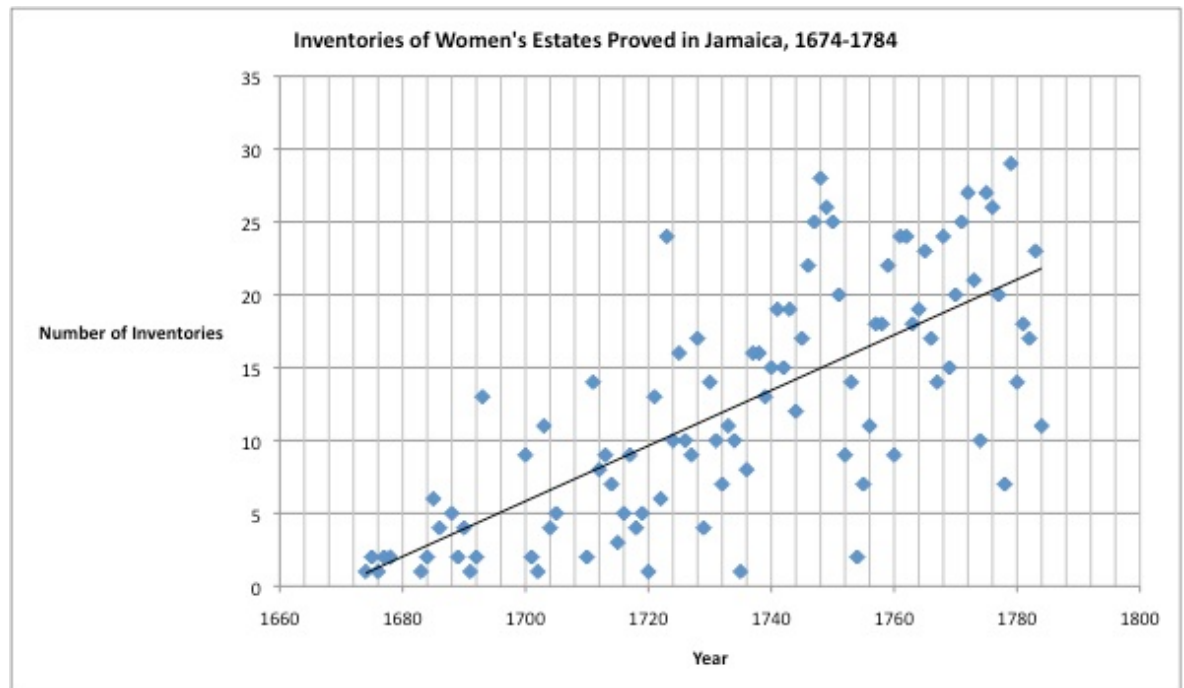


Figure 3.3. Inventories of Women's Estates Proved in Jamaica, 1674-1784.

Inheritance practice, which vested more property in women's hands, and the increase in estate ownership by women were highly correlated. Many factors made the colony a conducive environment for women to command property, from the custom of bequeathing estates to women, the preference of widows and spinsters to remain unmarried, and the high mortality rates of men. But slaves ultimately constituted the majority of women's wealth. This fact alone discloses the dramatic influence of slavery

¹⁵⁰ In 1693, 7,768 free white people lived in the colony (free people of African descent were not recorded). By 1788 18,347 white people and 7,605 free people of color lived there. Demographic information from Burnard, *Planters, Merchants, and Slaves*, 230.

on free women's lives. It was nothing less than transformative. Slavery offered women a new means of accumulating and transmitting significant resources—one that did not exist for women in Britain.¹⁵¹ More than half of the 741 women who made wills specifically mentioned slaves whom they owned or intended to purchase. Those who only mentioned “real and personal” estates would also have held slaves.¹⁵² It is well within the realm of probability that three quarters of all of the women leaving wills during the first century of English colonization owned slaves.¹⁵³

Probated inventories of women's estates reveal the extent of female slave ownership from another angle. In the 1,188 inventories of women's estates proved between 1674 and 1784, one finds a dramatic increase in the average percent of the total value of women's estates that consisted of slaves.¹⁵⁴ At the end of the seventeenth century, slaves comprised only fifteen percent of the total value of women's estates. By 1784, enslaved people accounted for sixty percent of the wealth represented in probated female estates. If one considers the trends tracked in Figures 3.1 and 3.2 together, one sees the relationship between the increase in female-held estates and women's growing investment in slaves. How much of women's wealth consisted in slaves cumulatively over the 10-year period? Slaves comprised at least one-quarter of the total value of approximately two-thirds of women's estates. Slaves made up fifty to one hundred percent of the total estate values within this group.

¹⁵¹ Scholars have yet to produce rigorous studies of female slave ownership in northern British America. I suspect that similar patterns of female slave ownership would emerge, though on a smaller scale than in Jamaica.

¹⁵² Of the 741 women who created wills, 446 do not refer to slaves. Women often refer only to “real and personal” estates, without describing what these estates were comprised of. Slaves were likely included in many “real and personal” estates.

¹⁵³ This matches my estimates of men giving three-quarters of all wives and daughters slaves as legacies.

¹⁵⁴ The inventory data was derived from the aforementioned database of inventories created by Trevor Burnard, *Jamaica Inventories, 1674-1784*, JA.

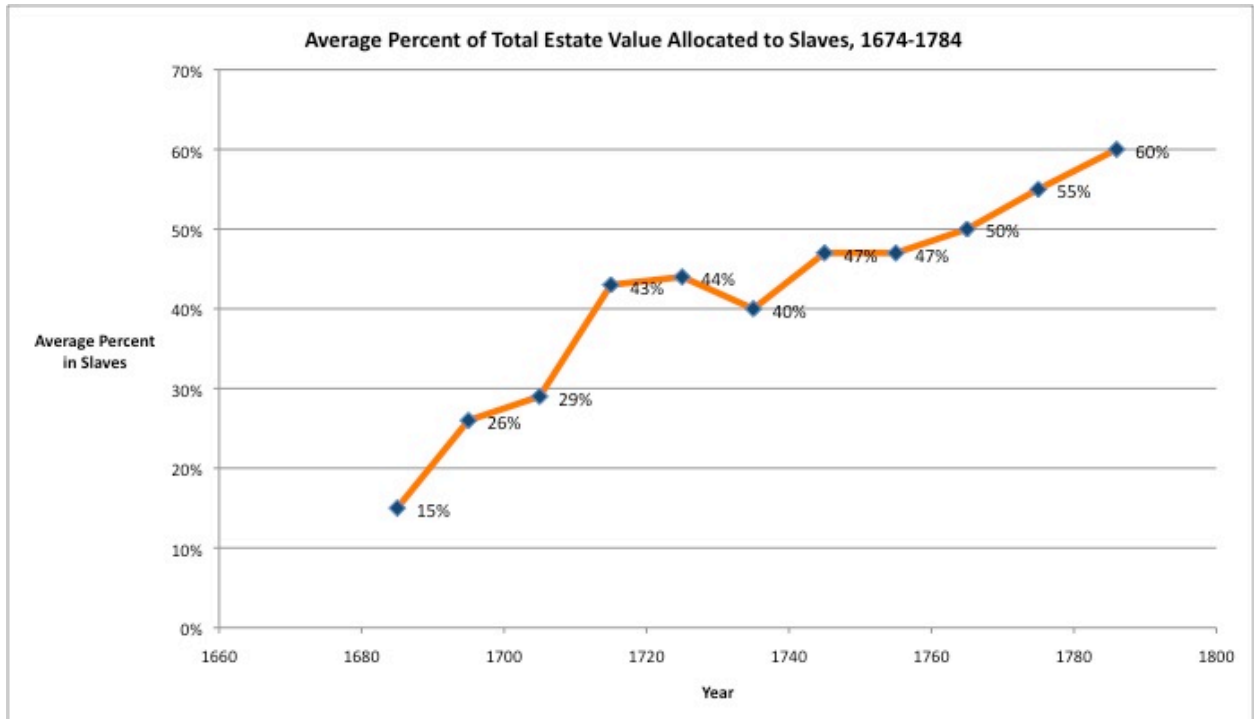


Figure 3.4. Average Percent of Total Estate Value Allocated to Slaves, 1674-1784.

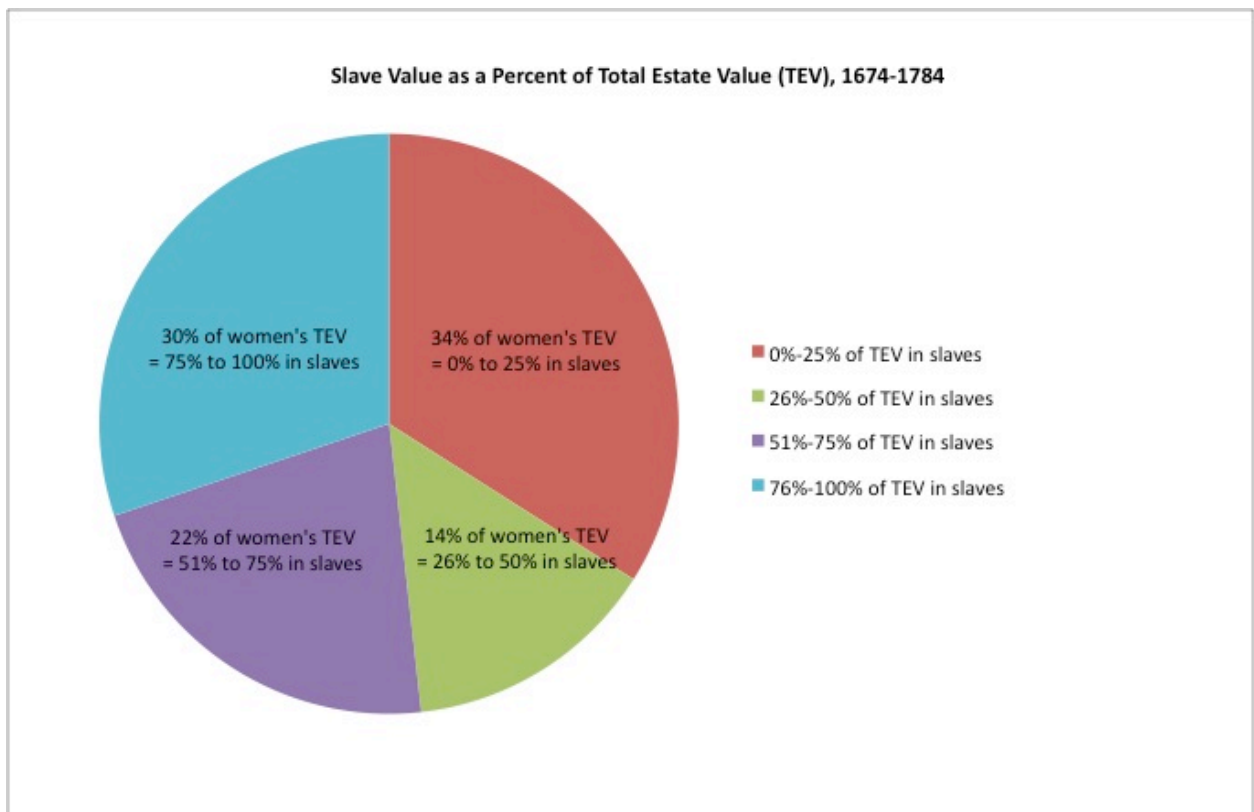


Figure 3.5. Slave Value as a Percent of Total Estate Value (TEV), 1674-1784.

Information from probated inventories substantiates the patterns exhibited by colonial wills: at least half of all female colonists owned slaves, and their share was probably larger.¹⁵⁵ Additionally, women's investment in slavery was considerable. As Figure 3.3 shows, slaves represented considerable financial assets for most female slaveholders. Jamaica became the largest slaveholding colony in British America by the middle of the eighteenth century. Slaves were the fundamental currency of its society. All free people regardless of gender or race made significant investments in human beings, and women, in particular, benefited from the profusion of this form of colonial capital.

Conclusion

Colonists' widespread usage of equitable marriage and inheritance practices favorable to women had significant material and ideological consequences. The erosion of the common law customs of dower, coverture, primogeniture, and entail all had the cumulative effect of distributing property more evenly between the sexes. The legal treatment of slaves as chattel, or personal property, decisively changed free women's position in colonial society. Slaveholding placed a novel and extremely valuable form of wealth in female hands. They became important slaveholders, helping to drive the demand for more African slaves to be transported to the island. Equity measures provided the means of protecting women's newfound wealth, both within and outside of marriage. Women's material power translated into social and legal power. As they inherited more

¹⁵⁵ Colonial wills indicate that three-quarters of women inherited slaves. Probate inventories suggest that two-thirds to three quarters did as well. This number has been intentionally reduced to half to take into account the poorer women who did not make wills or own estates. However, given the nature of colonial society, even women who lived on the margins of society might have owned one or two slaves.

wealth, particularly in the form of slaves, their ability to support themselves and their families without male assistance increased. Wealthier women commanded more authority in families. Those who were unmarried could do as they pleased with money and slaves. Women bought property, built houses, and purchased an array of goods. They bought and sold slaves. Those who possessed such resources could support other family members, male and female alike. They could also afford to hire attorneys and go to court to protect their stakes in family estates. By the middle of the eighteenth century, women commanding both capital and slaves became ordinary fixtures of colonial society.

Colonists did not aim to make men and women equal, nor did they adhere to Enlightenment precepts—increasingly concerned with championing individual liberties and rights—in inheritance. However, men and women consistently made inheritance-related decisions that contradicted common law restrictions on women's legal and economic control of resources. In aggregate, colonial wills manifest their dissatisfaction with the limitations of coverture, dower, and primogeniture. These common law institutions were treated as outmoded if not detrimental to younger generations. On an ideological level, colonists' inheritance decisions unwittingly eroded an allegiance to patriarchal modes of ordering society. Free people had more pressing concerns than regulating women's behaviors. A rapidly growing slave population demanded urgent, constant attention. Grappling with devastating mortality rates, men could not afford to subordinate both free women and slaves. To reap the benefits of slave labor, all free people needed to participate in its maintenance. Instead of protecting male prerogatives, free people adopted practical measures that nurtured family interests across generations. In this colonial context, women's status as free mattered more than their gender.

CHAPTER FOUR

Womanly Masters: Female Slave Ownership in Jamaica

The Jamaican-born author John Kelly imagined the lives of free women and enslaved people as hopelessly intertwined in his unpublished 1737 play “The Islanders, or Mad Orphan.” In Kelly’s estimation, slavery increased free women’s subservience within the household. As one character observed: “Our West India husbands look upon their Wives, as very little above their Slaves, nay very often treat'em worse." A planter’s wife would expect to be “buried” alive on a plantation where she would be “employ'd all day in making Breeches and Pettecoats for the Slaves.” Living in a slave society dramatically increased the domestic work that women typically performed as they shouldered the responsibility of caring for both slaves and family members. Integrating slaves into household economies also placed new demands upon women. A plantation wife would likely spend her days “taking an Account of the weight of sugar; which goes out of the plantation, with the quantity of Rumm” while also operating “a Hucksters

Shope” that sold “drams and Tobacco” to the family slaves.¹ Kelly perceived of slavery's expansion as increasing women's degradation and servitude. It intensified traditional gender roles by demanding that women serve both husbands and slaves. Recompense would also be marred by slavery. Though a wife could expect material rewards such as “a coach and six horses,” the horses would be employed grinding sugarcane during the day. A “negro coachman, with a pair of ozzenbrig breeches, a half hat, and livery coat...with two or three naked negro wenches be hind,” would “compleat the equipage.” Slavery turned the epitome of British luxury into a vulgar display of property, which Kelly implied was “sufficient demonstration” of a Jamaican husband's affection for his wife.²

Though “The Islanders” fit into a growing body of literature that critiqued West Indian social and cultural practices by portraying colonists as hedonistic and rapacious gluttons, his attention to the plights of women distinguishes it. While British authors used longstanding female types to portray colonial women as either strumpets or indolent children, Kelly considered them as agents in their own right. Having grown up in Jamaica, he also possessed an insider's knowledge of local society. In the play, he chose to depict the deeply entangled relationship between gender and slavery. The play focuses on the limited marital choices available to the female protagonists who, like slaves, were deemed legal dependents and, in certain respects, the property of husbands. Women and slaves also engaged in relatively reciprocal exchanges of labor. In return for providing them with clothing, tobacco, and rum, slaves would parade the mistress about town and care for her at home. Kelly did not invent the longstanding association between women and slaves. However, he made this analogy historically specific by exploring the

¹ Kelly, “The Islanders,” 1737, King's Mss. 301, p. 19, BL.

² Ibid.

constraints that gender and slavery placed upon women. Kelly's play is a fascinating and rare portrayal of free women's interactions with enslaved people. Using Kelly's work as a starting point, this chapter explores the varied nature of free women's involvement in Jamaican slavery. They participated as buyers and sellers in the slave market, thus helping to fuel the slave trade. They also personally managed slaves who worked inside households and on plantations. All slave owners, male and female alike, wielded the same legal rights over enslaved people. Women, like men, could buy and sell other human beings, send them to court, and have them tortured and even killed.

Women's decisions to manumit or to punish slaves, and their efforts to pursue those who escaped their authority, illuminate the complex nature of relations between owners and slaves. These sources, however, lack the rich detail of the diaries and letters written by women who owned slaves in Antebellum America. Few such sources have survived from colonial Jamaica, and what exists is primarily focused on business matters. The dearth of manuscript sources has resulted in scholarly emphasis on a handful of accounts published in the late eighteenth- and early nineteenth centuries. Two of these narratives—the *Journal of a Lady of Quality* kept by Janet Schaw in 1774-1776 and *Lady [Maria] Nugent's Journal*, chronicling the first five years of the nineteenth century—offer British women's observations about the colony. Alongside these, Edward Long's monumental three-volume *History of Jamaica*, first published in 1774, has become a dominant source of information about the social and sexual mores of colonists. Though fascinating in their own rights, Schaw and Nugent, both outsiders, only lived on the island briefly, while Long's perspective—admittedly extensive as a planter, slaver, lieutenant governor, and vice-admiralty judge—is notoriously racist and misogynistic.

How then can we develop a more nuanced and contingent account of the dynamics that prevailed among female colonists and the people they owned?

Women in the Slave Market

During the first century of settlement, slaves constituted the most valuable assets owned by women. As demonstrated in Chapter Three, changing colonial inheritance practices helped make women major stakeholders in slavery. Slaves were the primary assets that relatives and friends gave to women and, in turn, that women gave away in their own wills.³ But while inheritance was one conduit that channeled slaves into and out of women's possession, it was not the only means by which women engaged in slavery. This section looks more closely at women's activities in the formal marketplace for slaves. It demonstrates that they frequently acted as purveyors and purchasers of human beings. In addition to buying and selling slaves, women also generated profits from slavery by hiring out enslaved people to others. Finally, women also stole and lost slaves as a result of extralegal, illicit activities.

Women's acquisition of slaves began at an early age. Parents frequently set aside money expressly for the purchase of "new" slaves from Africa, who were described as "new negroes," for their daughters. Widow Bonny Tamasin, for instance, gave £62 to her granddaughter to be "laid out in negroes."⁴ Edward Phips furnished his daughter Ann Coles with £222, which her executors were to use to buy "choice new negroes two men and two women," as well as "a new negro girl to wait on her."⁵ Similarly, William Farrell

³ An estimated three quarters of all women who received legacies from men were given slaves, while a similar percentage of women who made wills listed slaves in their bequests to others.

⁴ Will of Tamasin Bonny, 1727, vol. 17, IRO.

⁵ Will of Edward Phips, 1740, vol. 22, IRO.

gave £74 for the purchase of “new negroes” to his daughter.⁶ These daughters and granddaughters would have grown up with African people, as a result. Though the daughters did not make the purchases themselves, such bequests normalized the act of buying African slaves for them. Furthermore, their mothers—who were often responsible for following the directives recorded in husbands’ wills—did make the purchases, some of which their daughters surely witnessed. Such experiences established a clear precedent for female participation in the slave market at an early age.

Children learned how to buy, value, and sell slaves from relatives and parents. These experiences later informed their adult activities. As consumers and purveyors of human flesh, women increased the demand for more African slaves being imported into the colony and helped intensify British involvement in the slave trade.⁷ In 1718, Mary Walker asked her executors in Kingston to collect £19 due to her for the sale of one enslaved man and “immediately on receipt” to purchase two slave girls “out of the first Guinea” ship that arrived in port “as good as they can get for the money.”⁸ Guinea was a part of the West Coast of Africa where much of Britain’s slaving activity occurred. Walker, like many colonial women, was intimately aware of where the slaves brought to the island came from and ordered accordingly, preferring slaves from one region. Almost sixty years later, Grace Graham, a “free mulatto woman” from Kingston, used a similar vocabulary to describe the African identities of slaves. She purchased a “tall thin negro wench.” The slave was labeled as an “Ebo” woman with “yellow skin” that was marked

⁶ Will of William Farrell, 1740, vol. 22, IRO.

⁷ Trevor Burnard’s sample of twenty-five slave voyages in which the purchaser’s name was listed leads him to conclude that “women were not prominent slave buyers.” Different sources used in this chapter suggest that women purchased slaves directly from slave ships, even if they did not venture aboard the ships themselves. Burnard, “‘Gay and Agreeable Ladies,’” *Wadabagei* (2006): 34.

⁸ Will of Mary Walker, 1718, vol. 15, IRO.

with the smallpox. A year later, the slave escaped, and Graham placed an ad in the Kingston newspaper to recover the runaway.⁹ Graham identified her slave by the ethnic group, for the Ebo (or Igbo) people of Africa assuming that other colonists shared this knowledge.

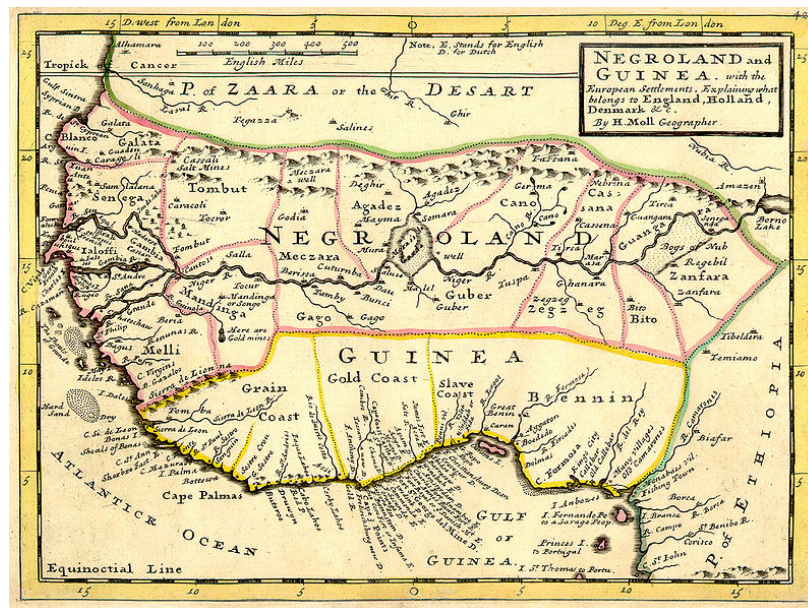


Figure 4.1. Herman Moll, “Negroland and Guinea” (1736, T. Bowles, London).

Most women who bought and sold slaves did so for purely financial reasons. Mary Manton wanted her male slave, Robin, to be sold to pay for her debts and funeral expenses; if Robin did not bring in enough money, she ordered her executors to sell a boy named Harry as well.¹⁰ Dorothy Stout sold at least eight slaves to pay off a mortgage.¹¹ Hannah De Torres sold a “mulatto woman slave named Betty and her childe Quashee” to

⁹ *The Jamaica Mercury & Kingston Weekly Advertiser*, July 31, 1778, NLJ.

¹⁰ Will of Mary Manton, 1720, vol. 15, IRO.

¹¹ *James Stout v. Thomas Verdon and wife (late Martha Stout)*, September 28, 1739, Chancery Court Records, vol. 10, JA.

her brother-in-law for £42.¹² The sisters Dorothy Watson and Elizabeth Lasselles, who ran a business in Kingston together, described slaves as commodities that could be divided into “shares”: in her will, Watson bequeathed her sister one “half part and share in two negro women slaves which we bought between us.” She also left a £19 legacy to a relative in Philadelphia “to buy her a negro in lieu of a runaway negro” that Watson had sold.¹³

Female activity in the slave market was commonplace. John Elbridge, for instance, advised his niece Mary Elbridge that “you may have negroes at reasonable rates, there being many ships gone & going to the coast; so that you may purchase what you want.”¹⁴ Elbridge had confidence in his niece’s knowledge of what the “reasonable rates” for slaves were and where they could be purchased. In turn, Elbridge later advised her niece Rebecca Woolnough, who lived in Britain, to sell several slaves that Elbridge was managing for her in Jamaica: “I only beg the favor of you to take them out of my hands.” Mary shrewdly calculated the relative value of each slave she oversaw and declined responsibility for any idle, unhealthy, or recalcitrant laborers. She described one “bety” as “sickly” and another, “hanah,” as “a very lazy creture,” writing, “hir work will scarce maintain” her two small children. She felt one Ned to be “very much ruined since he came to the island.”¹⁵ Elbridge was anxious to rid herself of the slaves, whom she described as causing her “so much vexation” and making her “quite tired.” She waited with impatience for a power of attorney to sell the slaves; since “you have thought fit to send me a power of attorney to ackt for you,” she wrote Rebecca’s husband Henry

¹² Will of Hannah De Torres, 1706, vol. 11, IRO.

¹³ Will of Dorothy Watson, 1727, vol. 19, IRO.

¹⁴ John Elbridge to Mary Elbridge, October 30, 1730, Woolnough Papers, Ashton Court Archives, BRO.

¹⁵ Mary Elbridge to Rebecca Elbridge, July 29, 1737, Woolnough Papers, Ashton Court Archives, BRO.

Woolnough, “I shall endeavour to dispose of the negros to the best advantage I can with all the justice as lys in my power.”¹⁶

Buying or selling certain slaves could have bittersweet results. Paradoxically, women bought “new” slaves to replace enslaved people whom they planned to free. Mary Truxton purchased a “new negro” named Phillis in exchange for freeing Phillis’s daughter, a “mulatto girl” named Nancy.¹⁷ The mother paid for her daughter’s freedom by becoming Truxton’s slave. Similarly, Elizabeth Turnbridge wanted to sell the two children of her slave, Moll Green “immediately”—yet she also left instructions for Moll’s manumission in her will.¹⁸ Women made decisions about whether to sell, bequeath, or free slaves on an individual basis. Philis Boteler bequeathed two slaves, Sambo and Grace, to her friend, but instructed the friend to free Grace when Hargreaves died. The rest of Boteler’s slaves were to be sold immediately upon her death to pay for her nephew’s mourning clothes.¹⁹

Women obtained valuable assets when they bought slaves and profited by selling or renting their slaves to other people. The additional income that women could earn by slave ownership made them less reliant on men for financial support. Widows and single women in possession of slaves did not have to marry to survive, nor did they have to reduce their social status by becoming wage laborers. Renting out slaves proved them with a new means of surviving independently. The “negro hire” accounts left by Hannah Jacobson indicate how women pieced together incomes by renting out slaves. Jacobson

¹⁶ Mary Elbridge to Henry Woolnough, December 14, 1737, Woolnough Papers, Ashton Court Archives, 19a, BRO.

¹⁷ Will of Mary Truxton, 1755, vol. 30, IRO.

¹⁸ Will of Elizabeth Turnbridge, 1727, vol. 17, IRO

¹⁹ Will of Phillis Boteler, 1729, vol. 17, IRO.

received a total of £26 for the following: “Nanny, £2, hire of Mimbo, £7, hire of Lucy, £3, hire of Liddy £4, hire of Long Tom £7.1, hire of Kingston £2, Darby £1.”²⁰

Female slave owners of all races tended to own and hire out slaves whose skills fell within the purview of domestic work, such as cooking, washing clothes, and sewing. This could be especially profitable in Kingston, Port Royal, and Spanish Town, where larger numbers of transient people who did not own slaves or have servants needed workers to cook, sew, and clean for them. Runaway slave advertisements placed in newspapers shed light on the practice. When Martha Ewers died, two of her slaves—Chloe and Sylvia, whom she rented out as washerwomen and house servants—ran away. The women took advantage of Ewers’ death and absconded with “several months wages.”²¹ Similarly, the following year “an elderly negro woman of the Congo country named Abigail,” a “short, thick,” and “rather inclined to be fat” slave washerwoman with a “yellowish complexion,” absconded from her mistress, Christian Gregory, a free woman of color.²² Enslaved women who worked outside of owners’ homes as servants and laundresses had more opportunities to escape. As Ewers’s advertisement indicates, they also earned wages, which slaves like Chloe and Sylvia chose to keep for themselves.

The prevalence of female householders in Kingston suggests that free women experienced little real difficulty supporting themselves. Poorer widows or women who never married hired out slaves and earned valuable income without having to enter the labor market. Earning rental income from slaves also tied female slave owners in Jamaica to women elsewhere in the Atlantic world. It has been estimated that twenty-five to

²⁰ James Stout v. Thomas Verdon and wife (late Martha Stout), September 28, 1739, Chancery Court Records, vol. 10, JA.

²¹ *The Jamaica Mercury*, July 16, 1778.

²² *The Jamaica Mercury*, October 9, 1779.

twenty-seven percent of householders in Kingston were white women.²³ Interestingly, Ellen Hartigan-O'Connor determines that women similarly headed seventeen to twenty-one percent of households in Newport and Charleston. In both places, slave ownership bolstered female autonomy: "the intersection of slave labor, a market for service work, and the practice of "hiring out" enslaved people sustained female-headed households of many stripes."²⁴ In slave societies throughout the Atlantic world, women reaped benefits from owning slaves. Even poorer women in Jamaica who owned nothing of value but one or two slaves had the additional labor to sustain themselves during their lifetimes. Women could sell their slaves if they found themselves in need of money, or they could pass them on to relatives and friends when they died.

Nor did women need to own and rent out slaves in order to participate in the slave market and stoke the colony's demand for slave labor. Women of diverse backgrounds rented slaves from other owners to perform a variety of jobs. One overseer hired out 120 slaves to a "free negro woman" named Mary Green to bring up "a very great number of loads of timber."²⁵ Planter and former Governor of Jamaica, Roger Hope Elletson, hired out his slaves to several women in his neighborhood. He even used money he earned from renting slaves to Mrs. Todd, in particular, to purchase even more enslaved men and boys.²⁶ Elletson urged his plantation managers to hire out "any negroes that are not necessary about the house nor can be useful to the estate" to anyone who needed them.²⁷ Arguably, female enterprisers were in greater need than male, although they could be just

²³ Burnard, "'Gay and Agreeable Ladies,'" 31.

²⁴ Hartigan-O'Connor, *The Ties that Buy*, 19, 21.

²⁵ Robert Hope Elletson to John Pool, April 8, 1774, Stowe Brydges Correspondence, ST 14, vol. 2, HL.

²⁶ Robert Hope Elletson to Edmund East and John Pool, September 15, 1771, Stowe Brydges Correspondence, ST 14, vol. 2, HL.

²⁷ Robert Hope Elletson to John Pool, November 3, 1770, Stowe Brydges Correspondence, ST 14, vol. 2, HL.

as problematic. A woman named Mrs. Macglashan wanted to rent a slave from Elletson named Greenwich. However, Greenwich expressed “so great a dislike to the Lady’s disposition” that the transaction fell through; Greenwich’s dealings with Macglashan in the past led him to be not “compelled to serve her.” He even feigned illness and “complained of spasms” in order to escape the arrangement.²⁸ In this case, the slave owner listened to his slave’s prostrations and Elletson stated that he would not hire out his slaves where “there is the least chance of their being ill treated” or “abused.”²⁹

Women and Slave-Poaching

Unlike Greenwich, most slaves had little say in deciding whom they worked for. In addition to being bought and sold, or rented out to strangers, slaves were frequently abducted from owners. Women were likewise involved in the extralegal practice of “detaining” slaves. During the first century of settlement, the influx of African slaves significantly outpaced the development of laws relating to slavery and institutions regulating it. Deeds, schedules of slaves, bills of sale, or mortgages could all be lost or forged, and free people were forced to turn to local courts to determine a slave’s rightful owner.³⁰ The cases brought to the Grand Court for this type of crime highlights the ambiguous position of the slave as well as the confusion surrounding how to prove legal ownership of another person. The fact that one’s claim to property could be so easily

²⁸ John Pool to Robert Hope Elletson, August 25, 1770, Stowe Brydges Correspondence, Box 25, HL.

²⁹ Robert Hope Elletson to John Pool, November 3, 1770, Stowe Brydges Correspondence, ST 14, vol. 2, HL.

³⁰ Suits for theft of other forms of property must have been tried in a different court in the colony. A thorough scouring of court records from the seventeenth- and eighteenth-centuries, including the Grand Court, Supreme Court and Chancery Court, failed to uncover criminal trials. The evidence collected from the Grand Court records for this project was gleaned from the only volumes that are useable at the Jamaica Archives. All other volumes of Grand Court (and Chancery Court) records have been deemed too fragile for public use and are inaccessible. This is unfortunate, as the few volumes, which are fit for production, contain invaluable and virtually untapped information about colonial life.

challenged indicates that the definition of being a slave itself was conditional, rather than being fixed and certain. Men and women frequently took advantage of this confusion by “detaining” or claiming that others wrongfully “detained” human property.

Free people initiated complaints of slave poaching by women in the Grand Court early in the colony’s settlement. In 1681, John Evans accused Eliane, the widow of John Sympkins, of keeping “one negro woman called Grace” who belonged to him. Evans claimed that he had given Grace to Sympkins's late husband, not to her; some time later, despite many promises, Elaine had “denied to deliver” Grace to Evans.³¹ In another case the year before, Thomas South demanded that Elizabeth Walker and her husband pay him £37 in recompense for an enslaved man. Apparently, Elizabeth Walker only had a right to the slave while she was “sole” or unmarried. By marrying, she supposedly gave up ownership of the man.³² Sixty years later, women still appeared regularly in disputes over “unjustly detained” slaves. Many brazenly sought to appropriate slaves, from both men and women. Charles Samuel accused one widow, Margaret Clarke, of taking a slave named Bacchus from his custody.³³ The same year, Dr. John Brook filed a complaint against the sisters Mary and Ruth Grey for assuming possession of a man named Cubah whom he claimed to own. Allegedly, the Greys stole Cubah while he was on the Parade, the Kingston town square.³⁴ The women in both 1743 cases were charged with detaining adult male slaves who were presumably physically superior to their captors. This fact raises questions about the degree of coercion involved in “detaining” slaves, and the agency enslaved people exerted in such instances.

³¹ Grand Court Records, 1680, vol. 1, JA.

³² Grand Court Records, 1680, vol. 1, JA.

³³ Grand Court Records, 1743, vol. 41, JA.

³⁴ Ibid.

Women also filed suit against men who stole slaves from them. Widow Elizabeth Sharpe accused two men, John Hammon and Peter Arnord, of illegally withholding her slaves. Apparently, Hammon purloined a slave woman from a churchyard while Arnord laid hold of another woman and her son. The court found both men guilty.³⁵ Another widow named Mary Phillips reported a carpenter for poaching three of her slaves at the Kingston courthouse. The court found him guilty, as well. Apparently, a woman's race had little bearing on her use of the colonial courts. Joan Bravitt, a "free negroe woman," accused "gentleman" Daniel Garrigus of appropriating her slave. Bravitt alleged she sustained £71 in damages from the loss of the slave.³⁶ Women, thus, effectively used legal institutions to litigate against those whom they perceived as thieves. In a colony so heavily invested in the slave system, the property rights of all free people, regardless of gender, were protected.

Such disputes over the ownership of slaves were aggravated by the high mortality rates on the island. Women, who tended to outlive men, remarried frequently. They also had children from different marriages whose legal rights needed to be protected. When spouses died, women turned to the courts to enforce the claims that they and their children had inherited slaves. Elizabeth Prothers, wife of the bricklayer named Thomas Prothers, pursued another married couple for "holding" eight slaves that she believed she was entitled to as part of her dower from a previous marriage.³⁷ In 1743, widow Susannah Wallis filed a complaint on behalf of her young son Caleb Gartbrand against another child John Harks Gartbrand. The Gartbrands were related, it appears, and John Harks Gartbrand's own widowed mother rose in his defense. Wallis, who appears to have

³⁵ Ibid.

³⁶ Grand Court, May 1761, vol. 71, JA.

³⁷ Grand Court Records, 1743, vol. 41, JA

remarried after the death of Caleb's father, nonetheless pursued her son's relatives for taking an enslaved woman she claimed belonged to Caleb.³⁸

Orphaned children, who did not have parents to protect their interests, were particularly at risk of having their slaves stolen by adults. The guardian of the "infant" Christian Tea, the butcher Daniel Stinger, complained to the court that the Deputy Marshall illegally "took" a woman named Venus from the girl. Likewise, the guardian of the orphaned Hagar Williams accused Daniel Grant of stealing an enslaved man from her. One John Wilson was charged with taking three slaves from the young sisters Mary and Elizabeth Jarum at a church. Even adolescent Anna Booth, considered to be an "infant" in the eyes of the law, implicated herself in the taking of an adult male slave from the children Peter, Thomas, and Henry Booth, who may have been her younger brothers or cousins.³⁹

Many of the aforementioned "slave thefts" occurred in public places like courthouses, parades, and churchyards. Such was the norm in a place where enslaved people commonly congregated with those who were free. It may seem counterintuitive for those accused of thievery to "steal" others' slaves in crowded places where slaves and masters alike could easily draw attention to their plight. However, bustling town centers may in fact have facilitated such action. Furthermore, enslaved people may have willingly decided to abscond with their "captors." Perhaps some of the slaves "detained" by free people were in fact joining more benign masters and mistresses. This is especially true of free women charged with "stealing" enslaved men, who could have physically resisted the women's efforts.

³⁸ Ibid.

³⁹ Ibid.

Poaching cases further elucidate the extent to which female slave owners were enmeshed in the colony's slave culture, as both plaintiffs and defendants in cases where the rightful ownership of another human being was in question. Evidence from court records hardly paints a portrait of colonial society as aggressively patriarchal. Women acted as aggressors and stole slaves from men. They effectively pursued others who encroached upon what they considered to be their property, and actively used of local institutions such as courts. Colonial women did not refrain from litigating against anyone, be it male or female, whom they perceived of as violating their property rights.

Freeing Slaves

While women bought, sold, and even stole slaves, they also freed them. Scholars have studied white men who obtained liberty for enslaved mistresses and children. However, women of all races also freed their slaves. Nearly twenty percent of the women who made wills between 1665 and 1757 left instructions to free slaves in their ownership.⁴⁰ Female slave owners began to free their slaves at the end of the seventeenth century, before African slaves formed a significant majority of the island's population. This practice continued throughout the eighteenth century. Individual interest, rather than colonial laws, dictated who would be freed during the first century of settlement. In 1762, the colonial government passed a law limiting the amount of money that a free person of color could inherit to £1,428.⁴¹ However, this did not restrict women from manumitting slaves; it merely reduced the amount they could bequeath. In the manumission instructions, we find women perceiving some slaves as esteemed individuals who

⁴⁰ Roughly 140 out of the 740 women who made wills during this period left instructions for slaves to be manumitted.

⁴¹ See Livesay, "Children of Uncertain Fortune," 90-92.

deserved recompense for their services, while observing others as commercial and financial assets. Personal relations between free women and their slaves, more than any other factor, determined who would be freed and who would remain in bondage.

Women began to free slaves decades after Britain seized Jamaica in 1655. These slaves were among the first few generations of enslaved Africans brought to the island. In 1689, for instance, Elizabeth Style stipulated that her slaves Venus and Alfonsoe were to be freed three months after her death.⁴² In 1683, Elizabeth Inglett gave all of her “worster sort of waring cloaths” to her enslaved women Betty and Prue. She granted Prue, as well as Prue’s son Tom and daughter Sarah, their freedom, bequeathing them “ye long yard & little houses southward of house I know dwell in” and £7. Inglett also freed Betty and her children, but did not leave them any legacies.⁴³ In 1688, Esther Cope gave enslaved woman Tutella, whom she called her “negro woman” and her “servant,” to her cousin for five years, after which she was to be manumitted and given £4.5.⁴⁴ Finally, Susanna Butler in 1702 granted “absolute freedom” to her slaves Dick and Grace and provided them with four acres of land to live on during their natural lives.⁴⁵

Women who emancipated their slaves often described them as indentured servants who deserved freedom after serving for a certain period of time. Indeed, in leaving manumission instructions, most women used the standard phrase that they were freeing people from “servitude” rather than from “slavery.” Many women cited slaves’ “faithful service” as the principal and only reason for enfranchising slaves. Elizabeth Woodland freed her slave Grace and Grace’s three children “in consideration of severall years of

⁴² Will of Elizabeth Style, October 12, 1689, Dawkins Family Papers, NLJ.

⁴³ Will of Elizabeth Inglett, 1683, vols. 3-5, IRO.

⁴⁴ Will of Esther Cope, 1688, vol. 7, IRO.

⁴⁵ Will of Susanna Butler, 1702, vol. 10, IRO.

faithful service had and rec. (received).”⁴⁶ Likewise, Elizabeth Totterdell manumitted one Joan “in consideration of several years faithful service” and gave her an annuity of £4.⁴⁷ In this respect, female slave owners viewed slavery—like other forms of early modern servitude—as conditional, rather than as a permanent and indelible facet of identity or fact of life.

Women who manumitted slaves did not exhibit a preference for females over males or children over adults. Elizabeth Doddington granted freedom in 1703 to an adult male named Tom, who worked as a bricklayer for seven years to “help build on ye land” that she gave to local widows. Doddington also owned a woman named Rose and her children and offered the entire family freedom, after Rose served her friend Ann Price for four years. Doddington’s seven other slaves were to be immediately freed on her demise.⁴⁸ Anna Smith freed her “mulatto fellow Jemmy,” who was twenty-five years old. She also manumitted a woman and a girl, but stipulated that the latter would not be free until she turned eighteen. Until that time, she would “continue in the care” of Smith’s sister.⁴⁹ The slaves owned by Doddington and Smith varied in sex and age, as did the conditions of their manumissions. Other women only freed male slaves.⁵⁰

The slaves that women chose to free did not fit into any specific category, nor did the bequests that women made to those whom they enfranchised. Though women described slaves as “faithful” servants, the bequests they left to the ones they manumitted differed significantly from customary gifts to free servants. Though servants might

⁴⁶ Will of Elizabeth Woodland, 1734, vol. 19, IRO.

⁴⁷ Will of Elizabeth Totterdell, 1735, vol. 19, IRO.

⁴⁸ Will of Elizabeth Doddington, 1703, vol. 10, IRO.

⁴⁹ Will of Anna Smith, 1729, vol. 22, IRO.

⁵⁰ Elizabeth Eagon freed her “negro man slave Lester.” Likewise, Mary Cotman manumitted her “negro or mulatto man slave Harry” and ordered “he may not be molested or disturbed otherwise then a King's subject from the hour of my decease.” Will of Elizabeth Howard Eagon, 1737, vol. 21, IRO; Will of Mary Cotman, 1725, vol. 16, IRO.

receive small financial gifts or clothing, they were rarely given substantial legacies. In contrast, many women provided freed slaves with generous allotments of land, money, and household goods. These bequests bore a greater resemblance to legacies given to relatives and friends. Magdalen Gason manumitted her slave Sarah along with her six children; characteristic of such manumissions, she gave Sarah six silver spoons—a commonplace gift made by free grandmothers to grandchildren. Sarah was also to receive whatever slaves and personal effects remained after her debts were discharged.⁵¹

Women gave land as well to slaves whom they manumitted. They did so to ensure that recently freed slaves who owned nothing would, at the very least, have housing and income. Rachell Shergill gave her “former slave [Daphne] who I have set free by manumission” a piece of land for Daphne and her husband to live upon during their lives.⁵² Mary Hallwood freed five slaves and gave them a “piece of garden land with buildings on it” in Kingston “to hold for their common use.”⁵³ Ann Verrin instructed her executors to sell two female slaves to pay off her debts, while freeing a man named Cudjoe and giving him a plot of land to live on.⁵⁴ Mary Williams freed eight slaves and ordered her executors to buy them “a piece of good land worth two hundred pounds and build thereon two houses for their immediate settlement.” Additionally, Williams gave each of these slaves an annuity of £7 “towards their support and maintenance,” which was to be paid from the interest earned on £714 set aside for them.⁵⁵

The amounts that women bequeathed to slaves who were to be freed were significant. In an age when domestic servants in Britain earned between £2 and £15 per

⁵¹ Will of Magdalen Gason, 1737, vol. 21, IRO.

⁵² Will of Rachell Shergill, 1751, vol. 28, IRO.

⁵³ Will of Mary Hallwood, 1761, vol. 32, IRO.

⁵⁴ Will of Ann Verrin, 1771, vol. 38, IRO.

⁵⁵ Will of Mary Williams, 1753, vol. 29, IRO.

annum, a lifetime annuity of £7 was enough to survive on.⁵⁶ Of even greater value were the slaves that women gave to those they manumitted. As discussed elsewhere, slaves were often the most valuable assets owned by women and they passed such capital onto those who had recently elevated into the ranks of the free. Ironically, women who turned former slaves into slave owners helped to ensure the investment of all free people, even those recently freed, in the continuance of slavery. Ellinor Hayle freed her slave Cuffy for his “faithfull service,” and provided him with a handsome legacy of ten acres of mountain land at a place called Smokey Hole, “whereon is planted and growing a plantain walk and coffee, together with an old negro man Quaco.” Not only did Hayle give Cuffy the elderly Quaco, she also directed that another male slave, Sharper, be sold to finance the gift to Cuffy.⁵⁷ In a similar bequest, Priscilla Guy enfranchised an “old negro man named Peter,” gave him ownership of the house he lived in, along with one acre land it was on and “all the fruit trees growing thereon.” To the gifts, she added a yearly income of £4 and a “negro boy.”⁵⁸

As the directions put forth by Ellinor Hayle and Priscilla Guy suggest, selling and making gifts of slaves were often intertwined in manumissions. Elizabeth Sharpe insisted that the enslaved girl Ann Good be freed immediately upon her death “so that she may not come into the hands custody or possession of my executor or any other person whatsoever or be made subject to the payment of any legacies...funeral expenses or debts.” Sharpe’s determination to protect Ann Good stood in contrast to her treatment of the girl’s mother, whom she sold. Having lost her mother, Good was to receive another enslaved woman named Violet upon manumission. Sharpe also freed two girls and gave

⁵⁶ Emsley, Hitchcock and Shoemaker, “London History-Currency, Coinage and the Cost of Living.”

⁵⁷ Will of Ellinor Hayle, 1760, vol. 32, IRO.

⁵⁸ Will of Priscilla Guy, 1748, vol. 26, IRO.

them £7 a year for life and part of her apparel. Despite this generosity, Sharpe displayed marked favoritism by reserving four of her “best gowns” and a quilt for Ann Good. Sharpe deprived the girl of her real mother, but acted like a surrogate mother by providing her with a slave and special clothing.⁵⁹

Giving enslaved people to those who were recently freed from bondage was not entirely mercenary. Women could use the stratagem to keep families intact and protect certain slaves by ensuring they would not be sold to strangers when they died. Cecelia Mayo manumitted her slave Sarah and “gave” the woman her two sons to “serve” their mother during her lifetime. When she died, the boys would be freed from slavery. Mayo had a “select” relationship with Sarah, bequeathing a piece of land, which would pass to Sarah's sons when she died. Though she did not identify her race, Mayo may have had African ancestry herself: she gave the other half of her property to the man who owned her own “sister” Phoebe, whom Mayo described as a “negro woman.” Phoebe’s owner was to allow Phoebe use of the property during her life, after which it would pass on to Sarah and her sons. Phoebe would also receive all of Mayo’s wearing apparel and jewels, while Sarah and her family would inherit the “rest and residue.” Taking into account the fact that Sarah was Mayo’s principal heir, it is even probable that the two women were related, and that Mayo owned Sarah as a means of protecting her.⁶⁰

Mayo's circumstances, and the obfuscation of her racial heritage, were not unique for the era. Anna Maria Lloyd may have been a free woman of color as well. Lloyd freed a “negro wench” named Prue “(alias Prudence Wignall)” and left money to provide mourning clothing for Prue's relative, a free negro woman” named Ann Wignall. Lloyd

⁵⁹ Will of Elizabeth Sharpe, 1747, vol. 26, IRO.

⁶⁰ Will of Cecelia Mayo, 1745, vol. 25, IRO.

also freed an “old negro wench” named Venus, and subsequently bequeathed Venus’s daughter to her mother. Finally, Lloyd gave a mulatto boy named Peter “(alias Peter Hayes)” some land in Kingston. People who had surnames usually were the children of free parents, or had been baptized, or both. Lloyd’s complex relations with free and enslaved people of color reveals a real if shadowy existence of their community. Lloyd and Mayo used inheritance law to safeguard friends and relations, even if it meant giving ownership of children to their parents. In making such bequests, women ensured that freed adults—whose status would nonetheless still be fragile—could maintain the legal rights to their children, including the ability to manumit them at the appropriate times.⁶¹

Though women were far more reticent than men to acknowledge relations with enslaved men, a few manumission orders also hint at the possibility of such liaisons. Mary Chidloy—in freeing her slave Dick, and his daughter Taracoate, whom she called “my little negro girl Taracoate”—raised this possibility. She gave Dick an annuity of £3, and Taracoate a considerable £86 legacy to be put out at interest. Chidloy also asked her executors to see that the girl be educated. The care that Chidloy lavished upon Taracoate, and her enfranchisement of the girl’s father, indicates that she may have been the child of the free woman and her slave. Chidloy, who did not identify her own race, may also have been of African descent.⁶²

Thirty years later, Hannah Dennis freed a “negro boy christened William” who was possibly her relative; he certainly bore her surname. However, it is unclear if William was her son or the son of her nephew, whom she entrusted him to. William was to be manumitted and “Christianly trained up and liberally educated.” If William had the

⁶¹ Will of Anna Maria Lloyd, 1767, vol. 38, IRO.

⁶² Will of Mary Chidloy, 1708, vol. 12, IRO.

“capacity for learning any trade or livelihood,” he was “to be taught the same”; if not, he was still to be “maintained and provided for in a handsome manner as a Christian.”⁶³

Both Mary Chidloy and Hannah Dennis provided the children whom they manumitted with more generous bequests than women commonly gave to former slaves; this largesse suggests the existence of a deeper, likely familial relationship. Some free women did make their ties to enslaved children explicit. Sarah Sparks, who did not identify herself as “negro” or “mulatto,” directed her executors to purchase the “liberty and freedom” of her son Robert Sparks, whom she gave £7 “towards his commencement of a livelihood.” But such openness was never commonplace.⁶⁴

Unlike women who freed adults, slave owners like Sharpe who freed children often treated them as surrogate kin. It is probable that these women, most of whom were widows, had lost their own children and unofficially adopted enslaved children into their families. Young people who were freed at an early age and provided with resources had a greater chance of assimilating into free society. They often received educations, whereas adults did not. Elizabeth Wilds manumitted an enslaved girl named Martha Parlour, “who has been baptized in the Christian faith and learned to read in order to know her duty as a Christian.” The girl’s mother, Venus, would be “obliged to work” for the maintenance and education of her daughter until Martha turned twenty-one, during which period Martha would be placed under the “care” and “tuition” of a free woman named Mrs. Martha Horsfield, who would be paid £21 by Venus. Once Venus had paid this sum, she too could be released from slavery.⁶⁵

⁶³ Will of Hannah Dennis, 1739, vol. 22, IRO.

⁶⁴ Will of Sarah Sparks, 1743, vol. 24, IRO.

⁶⁵ Will of Elizabeth Wilds, 1747, vol. 26, IRO.

Mary Carpenter left perhaps the most detailed instructions for freeing her slaves in 1740. Two girls named Betsy and Molly, who were baptized and subsequently re-named Elizabeth Brodgin and Mary Carpenter, received particular attention. By giving Molly her own first and last name Carpenter recognized the girl as a member of her family. Like other women who manumitted children, Carpenter turned her slaves into fictive kin. This made sense, as Carpenter was a widow whose only surviving heir was her brother. Nevertheless, Carpenter—like the aforementioned Elizabeth Wilds—distinguished these children from their biological mother: an Indian woman named Diana, whom Carpenter wanted to remain in slavery until her daughters completed their education. During this time, she and another female slave named Phillis would work to pay for the “maintenance and education” of the children. If the enslaved women failed to earn enough to support Betsy and Molly, the estate would pay the remainder to “keep them at school” until they turned fifteen. At this point, they would be “left at their own discretion and management and may therefore want friendly care instruction and admonition.”⁶⁶ Carpenter instructed Betsy and Molly to turn to her attorney and friend for advice “in what manner they had best dispose of themselves,” and she urged them to be “obedient” in following the man’s advice. Carpenter’s conditions for Diana’s manumission were equally patronizing. Though she lauded the woman for her “many good and faithful services,” which “justly entitled her to some share of my esteem,” she would only be freed upon the condition that Diana “behave herself with all due obedience and as a good and faithful slave ought to do.” Carpenter’s executor had the power to determine whether Diana “behaved” herself like a good slave and was “worthy” of being freed.

⁶⁶ Will of Mary Carpenter, 1740, vol. 22, IRO.

Men who freed their mixed-race children commonly apprenticed them as artisans to learn trades. Women, too, adopted this practice. Some women sought training for boys. Mary Knight, for instance, used her will to further “confirm” the freedom of a mulatto boy named Christopher Allen whose manumission she had already recorded at the Secretary’s Office. Christopher was to be raised, clothed, and fed out of the estate’s profits and “put out” as an apprentice to “some good mechanic (as his genius shall turn to)” when he turned sixteen. Knight also wanted two African slave boys to be purchased out of a “Guinea ship” to apprentice alongside the young Christopher. The boy would receive £14 to buy set of tools for his trade when he turned twenty-one.⁶⁷

Other women wanted manumitted girls to learn skills that would enable them to earn a living later in life. Unlike boys—who could learn an array of trades ranging from carpentry to brick making, masonry to blacksmithing—girls faced limited professional options. Learning how to sew was one of the few skills that had a career trajectory. Girls could become seamstresses, mantua makers, or tailors and work in the fashion trade. Cloth was an expensive imported good in the colony, and knowledge of the array of fabrics might also lead a woman to become a mercer, or a retailer of cloth and accessories. Cornelia Robillyer left instructions for her slave girl Elizabeth Christopher to be manumitted and “bound apprentice” to a woman named Elizabeth Watkins, who would teach her to “to read to write work at her needle and other husery” for six years.⁶⁸ Mary Hadwen freed two girls, Amelia and Monemmia, and bequeathed them £3.6 to finance four years of “education and improvement in needlework.”⁶⁹ As with Robillyer and Hadwen, women manumitting girls often asked that they be taught to sew. This did not

⁶⁷ Will of Mary Knight, 1771, vol. 38, IRO.

⁶⁸ Will of Cornelia Robillyer, 1734, vol. 19, IRO.

⁶⁹ Will of Mary Hadwen, 1749, vol. 27, IRO.

imply that the children would become seamstresses, as nearly every woman was expected to possess sewing skills during the early modern period. However, the large number of free women of color identified as seamstresses in a 1754 census of Spanish Town indicates that many did indeed pursue this profession.⁷⁰ In freeing slaves, women assumed authority in determining who would remain in bondage and who would be released. They assumed considerable power in deciding the fates and the fortunes of other humans.

Coercion and Violence

Enslaved people who did not challenge the authority of owners and submitted to the conditions of slavery had the chance of being rewarded with freedom and even made wealthy by local standards. However, anyone who rejected enslavement faced severe consequences. Free Jamaicans were infamous for the severity with which they punished slaves. Aside from caricatures of jealous mistresses who viciously beat enslaved women perceived as competing for their husbands' affections, we know little about how women used coercion and violence to maintain authority over slaves. Little evidence exists to support the cliché that sexual competition fueled the violence, however. Women resorted to coercive measures for more practical and urgent reasons. Slaves significantly outnumbered free people in most parishes on the island. Living in dismal conditions, they had little incentive to work for free for their owners. Only harsh punishments could compel many slaves to labor without remuneration. Furthermore, threats of slave conspiracies and revolts increasingly reverberated in the minds of slave owners, male and

⁷⁰ "Spanish Town Census," 1754, SAS/RF 20/7, ESRO.

female alike. Not surprisingly, women's dependence upon slaves resulted in their participation in the culture of brutality that made slavery function.

It has been assumed that women's physical weakness relative to men's deterred them from owning slaves they could not dominate physically. Scholars who argue that women preferred to own female rather than male slaves pursue this line of argument. Yet, in Jamaica at least, women's physiques had little bearing on how many slaves they owned, or on what sex of slave they acquired.⁷¹ Recently, Thavolia Glymph has challenged the assumption that white women demurred from abusing slaves. She demonstrates that mistresses in Antebellum America subjected slaves to nearly incessant physical and emotional abuse.⁷² Although the sources for eighteenth-century Jamaica are more limited, what does exist suggests that women treated slaves with similar violence. Women employed a range of coercive measures, from sending slaves to "prison" to having them whipped and sold, to ensure compliance. They, like their male counterparts, often hired others to inflict punishments on slaves who transgressed the authority of owners. An account book kept by the widow Hannah Jacobson included "Sundry Charges attending the negroes," and this record notes payments for administering nearly thirty whippings to her slaves. Jacobson also paid to imprison the slaves, who were often incarcerated together in a group. Entries for "whipping Tom, whipping Adam, ditto Darby, catching Chaplin, and whipping him, catching, imprisoning and whipping four negroes, d. for Cambridge and Chaplin and whipping them, whipping Jonathan, prison

⁷¹ Colonial wills, court cases, correspondence and newspaper ads abound with examples of women owning adult male slaves.

⁷² See Chapters One and Two of Glymph, *Out of the House of Bondage*.

fees for six negroes” could be found, of course, in any slave owner’s journal.⁷³ So it was that Elizabeth Turnbridge could so easily order her executors to put one of her slaves “in irons till the first opportunity serves to send him off to be sold.”⁷⁴ Mary Ricketts, who moved from England to Jamaica 1757, represented slaves as “sulky wretches” who “require a whip for, every trifle.” Even so, she did not “think that sufficient excuse for the barbaritys exercised upon 'em here.”⁷⁵ As an outsider Ricketts’ low esteem for slaves did not prevent her from interpreting violent whipping as excessive.

Women and “Runaway” Slaves

It is no surprise that slaves “much distempered, “swoln,” infected with the “yaws,” and driven to “eat dirt” were “continually running away” from their owner widow Dorothy Stout.⁷⁶ The deplorable conditions that enslaved people were forced to endure, and the abuse they were subjected to, resulted in frequent attempts at escape from owners. The advertisements posted by women for “runaway slaves” in the Kingston newspapers indicate that many women created environments felt to be intolerable by slaves. By “running away” enslaved people found a temporary or even more permanent respite from bondage. Some slaves abandoned owners temporarily. Brief intervals from labor tempered the enormous tensions created by a society that was structured upon profound inequalities. Women who published ads for “runaway slaves” knew this, and so normally waited for more than a year for slaves to return before notifying the public of their

⁷³ James Stout v. Thomas Verdon and wife (late Martha Stout), September 28, 1739, Chancery Court Records, vol. 10, JA.

⁷⁴ Will of Elizabeth Turnbridge, 1727, vol. 17, IRO.

⁷⁵ Mary Ricketts to unknown recipient, June 23, 1757, Ricketts & Jervis Papers, Add. Mss. 30001, BL.

⁷⁶ James Stout v. Thomas Verdon and wife (late Martha Stout), September 28, 1739, Chancery Court Records, vol. 10, JA.

missing property. For instance, Christiana Baker posted an ad for her slave Phoebe, who had a “yellow complexion” and a “lump on “the bottom part of one of her ears” “occasioned by an ear ring” in October 1779, sixteen months after her disappearance.⁷⁷ By that time, another enslaved woman named Ruthy had been absent from her owner, Mary Satchwell, for two years before the latter publically solicited her return. Slaves who were hired out in urban areas formed relations with a diverse range of contacts. During her absence, Satchwell’s slave Ruthy adopted the alias “Pheba” even though she was branded on the shoulder with her owner’s initials, “MS.” Yet, Ruthy did not travel very far. Her mistress knew exactly where she was: living with free man Dr. Airey in Kingston, who Ruthy likely knew and had relations with. Her owner also knew that Ruthy had given birth to a child during her absence.⁷⁸

Slaves who were hired out often kept a small portion of the wages they earned. Jamaican runaways who had been hired out were more likely to be able to support themselves. When Sarah Feurtado advertised the flight of her enslaved coachman, Tom Hall, she mentioned that he was “often seen” in Kingston visiting his friends in prison and “at the east end of town.” Like Ruthy, the following year Tom Hall left his mistress but did not feel it was necessary to hide from her.⁷⁹ Another ad of Feurtado’s indicates that such patterns were common. When Feurtado notified the public to return a runaway seamstress named Cuba and her daughter Sukey, she admitted that they were “remarkably well known in this town.” Moreover, Sukey had often been “caught on board sundry vessels in the harbor and in Port Royal,” where she may have been

⁷⁷ *Jamaica Mercury*, October 16, 1779.

⁷⁸ “List of Unclaimed Slaves,” *Jamaica Mercury*, September 25, 1779.

⁷⁹ *Jamaica Mercury*, July 30, 1778.

operating as a huckster or a prostitute, or perhaps even plotting her escape from the island.⁸⁰

While the intentions of the slaves are unknowable, ads for runaways were as much acts of desperation as they were displays of power. Ruthy, Tom Hall, Cuba, and Sukey did not attempt to hide from their mistresses. Instead, both implicitly and explicitly, they rejected the conditions of slavery by exercising the right to live independently. Free women's control over enslaved people was a hard-won authority that required constant maintenance. Runaway slave ads allude to a form of enslavement that was tenuous and negotiable rather than absolute. They also vivify the individuality and the agency of people who were systematically valued as monetary assets. Such evidence captures yet another facet of the complex dynamics that existed between free women and enslaved people in Jamaica.

Rather than accepting their status as unpaid employees of free women, enslaved women operated their own entrepreneurial ventures in the colony's urban marketplaces. In Jamaica, enslaved people were expected to feed themselves out of the "provision grounds" that planters allotted to them for gardening and raising livestock. Many grew additional produce to sell for cash at the local markets. Indeed, free colonists derived much of the produce they ate from the markets held by enslaved people every weekend. So, the ads for "runaway slaves" acknowledge the ways enslaved people engaged in a wide range of non-plantation economic activity. The money that they earned by selling goods and produce in the markets and streets provided slaves with a degree of independence. The author of one ad who sought to recapture a woman named Fanny, stated she "has been used to sell things about Kingston streets," operating as an

⁸⁰ *Jamaica Mercury*, November 20, 1779.

independent entrepreneur outside of her owner's control. On the street, Fanny "refused to disclose her owner's name." Another ad for a "runaway " named Betty bore similarities to the ad for Fanny's recapture. Betty, like Fanny, participated in the island's urban economy by selling wood and water at the "negro markets" in Kingston and Spanish Town. Betty also devised means for resisting recapture. Betty's owner did not perceive of the woman as unintelligent because she was enslaved. On the contrary, Betty was described as a "sly, artful wench" who "when spoke to pretends to be foolish, in order to avoid giving direct answers."⁸¹ Betty's slyness enabled her to conceal her identity as an enslaved person, as did Fanny's "refusal" to identify her owner. Both women sought to achieve financial as well as legal and social independence from their mistresses. Their mistresses had to constantly negotiate the competing imperatives of control and independence.

A Troubled Relationship

Letters, court cases, wills, and literary sources created during the first half of the eighteenth century help to piece together the troubled, yet also intimate relations between free women and enslaved people. An inheritance dispute brought to the colonial Chancery Court in 1707 sheds light on relations of trust and dependence intertwining some enslaved people and free women. It also reveals why these relations were interpreted as suspect. The case, which pitted orphan George Barrs against his stepfather Bernard Andreas, focused on the actions of Barrs's deceased mother Dorothy. When Bernard Andreas married Dorothy Barrs she was a wealthy widow who owned a large pimento plantation worked by nearly one hundred slaves. However, the court focused on

⁸¹ *Jamaica Mercury*, July 22, 1779.

her relations with one enslaved woman named Great Jenny. Several witnesses believed Great Jenny possessed valuable information about Dorothy Andreas's money, which she apparently hid from her new husband before her death. One deponent testified that Bernard Andreas had "strictly examined" Great Jenny to tell him where his wife hid her money before she died. Witnesses were also asked if Great Jenny had given them bribes. Others claimed that she was responsible for revealing the hiding place of her mistress' money and silver to Andreas. According to one version of events, Andreas "suffered only the said Negro woman named great Jenny together with a white servant of his own to be present in the house," when he entered it to search for his wife's riches.⁸²

Great Jenny's superior knowledge of the Barrs household and of her mistress' personal fortune indicates that she was probably a house servant who worked closely with Dorothy Andreas. Witnesses revealed that Dorothy Andreas relied upon Great Jenny to act as her confidant and intermediary. Dorothy's niece testified that she received "a little box of her aunt's...by hand of a negro called Great Jenny of which Dorothy kept the key but she knew not what was in it." The niece returned the box to Dorothy when her aunt asked for it, and asserted that she never received money from Great Jenny. Great Jenny emerges from the court records as Dorothy Andreas's accomplice who delivered precious and mysterious items to other family members. Neither interrogators nor witnesses nor judges found it strange that Great Jenny was privy to the personal affairs of Dorothy and Bernard. She became an object of suspicion because she was closer to Dorothy in certain respects than was Dorothy's husband. Intimate knowledge gave Great Jenny agency and power within the Barrs household. If Dorothy Andreas ordered Great

⁸² Robert Hart, administrator of George Barrs, v. Bernard Andreas, October 8, 1707, Chancery Court Records, vol. 3, JA.

Jenny to secretly offer bribes to free people and to lie to her husband, an enslaved woman effectively superseded the authority of a free man.

The ambiguous relationship between Dorothy and Great Jenny indicates that intimacy between free and enslaved women could become problematic, especially if money was involved. Normally, such relations were considered unremarkable in the eyes of locals. Outside observers, however, experienced the closeness between free and enslaved people as a distinctive, if not disturbing feature of Jamaican life. Elizabeth Bentinck—wife of Henry Bentinck, 1st Duke of Portland—travelled from Britain to Jamaica in 1722 when he assumed the post of Governor. The overwhelming presence of slaves there defined his colony as a foreign “country” for Bentinck, who felt “one ought not to be surprised at what happens in this world, for I am sure I never thought of coming here.”⁸³ She was equally struck by the dynamics between free and enslaved. After spending several months in Jamaica, she saw the need there for more white people. However, she blamed the settlers themselves for failing to enlarge the white population. Rather than focusing on the island’s unhealthy environment or its high mortality, Elizabeth identified colonists’ preferences for slaves as the chief obstacle to attracting white servants: “a good deal of people here are so fond of there negroes, that they dont care for white servants.” She went on to claim: “There is severall of the best famillys in this town that has not one white body in there home.” Even so, Elizabeth displayed a degree of sympathy for the settlers insofar as every servant who did arrive on the island “drinks so prodigiously that one is not able to bear it.”⁸⁴ Their tendency towards drunkenness rendered them useless.

⁸³ Elizabeth Bentinck to the Countess Dowager of Portland, October 15, 1723, Bentinck Papers, 1,711, BL.

⁸⁴ Ibid.

An anonymously authored play—*The Fancy: or, A Voyage to London*, first published in London in 1744—echoed Bentinck’s characterizations of Jamaicans who preferred to be served by African slaves rather than British servants. While most early modern travel accounts characterize the West Indies as uncivilized, unhealthy, and degenerate in comparison with Britain, *The Fancy* offers a contrasting view of how Jamaican colonists perceived Britain. One of the main characters, Lady Fancysick, reverses the standard belief that the tropical climate was deleterious. She describes London as a “a nasty place, and so very cold, that I don’t know what to do with myself; the people in the street are pinch’d up, and make wry faces--the very water turns to glass; I can feel no heat, and am forced to sleep with my gown, petticoat, and stockings... what pleasure can there be to be always sitting before the fire roasting?--there’s nothing but colds and coughs in this place.”⁸⁵ The absence of slaves figures centrally in Lady Fancysick’s dissatisfaction with Britain. For her, slaves make Jamaica “home.” “Ay,” she admits, “I wou’d be glad to be served by my own negroes, and not by these servants, who will do what they please, they have given me warning; I’m now troubled to look out for new ones.”⁸⁶

Lady Fancysick’s desire for the comfort of being “served” by slaves registers on both an emotional and a practical level. The author defines slavery as *the* central cultural difference between Jamaica and the metropole. Creoles exhibit an aversion towards free white British servants who reject their authoritarian and abusive treatment. One servant states that Lady Fancysick cannot damn and curse and “threaten to use us” as she did with her slaves. One character, Mr. Miser, mirrors her Ladyship’s preference for slaves

⁸⁵ *The Fancy*, Scene 4.

⁸⁶ *Ibid.*, Scene 12.

and desires to “be amongst my Negroes; to live my own way, and have ‘em at command.”⁸⁷ A servant urges him to “take care of what you say, sir, you are now in a Christian country, and not amongst your Black slaves,” to which Miser responds “I don’t know who can live in this country, I’m sure I can’t, I wish I was amongst my blacks.”⁸⁸ Male and female colonists alike perceived of free servants as contentious and “never contented, and always threaten to give warning” in contrast with slaves, who do not have the freedom to choose their employers.

Not only does Lady Fancysick favor her slaves over free white people; she has adopted African tastes and mannerisms. Claiming that she “can’t eat the meat” in Britain, she longs for the African-influenced foods of Jamaica—such as country plantains, yams, salt fish, cassava, pepper pot, bananas, and cashews—exclaiming: “I like them better than your varieties.”⁸⁹ She desires to be back in her own “country” where she could go with her “dear” mother to “see the negroes dance.” Rather than being enamored with the sophisticated offerings of London’s theaters, she yearns to attend African musical performances. Similarly, Miser echoes Fancysick’s sentiments as he watches a parade in London: “What’s all this fine show to us? I’d rather be sitting at my door in Kingston, seeing my negroes about me; ay, eating of a plantain, salt fish and cassava, than to see this grandee show.” In the play, the colonists contrast the superficial pomp and “show” of London with the homey comforts of the island. The physical presence of African slaves and the profound cultural influences they wrought upon colonial society create a sense of “home” for free people.

⁸⁷ Ibid., Scene 3.

⁸⁸ Ibid.

⁸⁹ Ibid., Scene 4.

The contentment felt by the free characters amidst their slaves is not mutual, however. As a “Visitor” relays to Lady Fancysick, slaves “are not fit for service in this country, madam, and can’t be well managed, they often run away from their master, when they come acquainted with the country.” Slaves often escaped from servitude while travelling abroad with their owners. In *The Fancy*, Mr. Miser cannot comprehend why his “mulatto boy and girl” run away from him in London after he had refused many offers to sell them. The children may have been his own, as they were “brought up” with his family. Ultimately, they were still slaves, though, and the promise of freedom proved a greater lure than serving the Misers.

The Fancy portrays the impulse to wield authority over slaves as an essential characteristic of free colonists’ personalities, regardless of gender. As Mr. Miser acknowledged, “tis hard that one can’t be Master’s of their own slaves in this country.”⁹⁰ Lady Fancysick and Mr. Miser are so accustomed to having power over others that relinquishing it in a different cultural context, one without slaves, becomes impossible. At the end of the play, when Lady Fancysick returns to Jamaica, one character derisively proclaims: “Enjoy yourself agreeable to your own taste in a country you so long wish’d for, where you may be waitd upon like unto a Mandarin Lady, elevated by your own blacks, in a sedan.”⁹¹ By equating the unlimited power exercised by West Indians over slaves with the despotism of Eastern rulers, *The Fancy* recapitulates the broader critique of absolutism that so thoroughly saturated political and cultural discourses in Britain. Indeed, such discourses had been central to constituting British Protestant identity for over two centuries. Yet, as much as it denounces West Indian rule, the play also

⁹⁰ Ibid., Scene 14.

⁹¹ Ibid., Scene 16.

sympathizes with the Creoles' emotional dependence upon slaves, their preference for African cultural traditions, and their all-consuming need to command.

Conclusion

Near the end of the eighteenth century, Enlightenment ideas, as well as the growing abolitionist movement built on them, forced planters to represent slavery in a more humane light. Likewise, natives like Edward Long developed racial ideologies that proposed the innate and increasingly biological inferiority of people of African descent as a justification for slavery. Women's actions and words during the first century of settlement, however, capture a different moment in Atlantic slavery. In describing slaves, they used a nascent financial language that abstracted human beings and reduced them to their labor value. This language, however, competed uneasily with older Christian beliefs about human beings and early modern definitions of servitude. During this period, a free woman's status was less tied to gender, and the positions of slaves were still being defined. Indeed, these categories were being defined in relation to each other, though not as we have come to expect.

When the first free women and the first enslaved Africans arrived in Jamaica in the seventeenth century, the histories of the two became intimately intertwined. Free women of all races bought, sold, stole, punished, and freed enslaved people. Throughout the eighteenth century, female slave owners helped to create a social order that constantly threatened to self-destruct. Gender mattered less in colonial society, but women's financial and social gains came at a terrible price. Women helped to construct an unstable society where the enslavement and impoverishment of the majority enhanced the wealth and independence of a small free minority. Yet, enslaved people constantly challenged

the boundaries of authority that women sought to impose on them. Enslaved people who ran away or refused to work continually tested the legitimacy of their status as slaves and defied the conditions of bondage that women sought to subject them to. Colonists were well aware that enslaved people were worthy adversaries who needed to be dealt with harshly in order to ensure their compliance. In 1760, Tacky's Rebellion thoroughly unsettled colonists, exposing the fragility of colonial authority over a much larger enslaved population.⁹²

⁹² W. Swymmer to Rebecca Woolnough, June 10, 1750, Woolnough Papers, Ashton Court Archives, BRO.

CHAPTER FIVE

Pursuing Her Profits: Women, Gender, and Atlantic Commerce

When Arthur Hassall died in 1748, his wife Anna assumed ownership of a storehouse filled with a dazzling array of items: huge parcels of gold and silver lace; calico, velvet, and silk; hundreds of hats, shirts, and handkerchiefs; boxes of soap, reams of paper, scissors, cinnamon sticks, and snuff boxes.¹ The Hassalls imported manufactures from Britain to colonial Jamaica. Their storehouse contained the accoutrements necessary for participating in polite and genteel society. Those who could purchase the printed cottons, colored ribbons, or ostrich plumes hidden therein stood a chance of mastering the lexicon of eighteenth-century fashion and taste. This amassment materialized the wealth and the manufacturing prowess of a growing British Empire into physical objects. Upon her husband's death, Anna Hassall also became the sole owner of thirty-nine enslaved men, women, and children. Rather than rescind the management of her husband's mercantile enterprise and the slaves who made it function, Hassall took it over.

¹ Inventory of Arthur Hassall, February 25, 1748, vol. 27, f. 164, JA.

Hassall's gender did not preclude her from participating in Britain's increasingly global marketplace, nor in slavery. An adept and cosmopolitan businesswoman, she continued to import large quantities of British-manufactured goods to the colony. Yet, Hassall's financial interests lay elsewhere. Despite almost incessant war between Britain and Spain, Hassall re-exported her inventory across national boundaries to Spanish territories where greater profits could be earned. She also strategically invested in privateer ships that attacked Spanish and French merchant vessels. Hassall's trading endeavors were facilitated by the unpaid work of the enslaved craftsmen, sailors, and cultural intermediaries whom she relied upon. Slave ownership afforded Hassall a means of saving money on wages and also provided her with valuable assets embodied in human beings.

Anna Hassall was not an outlier, nor were her activities anomalous. The growth of Britain's American Empire, from New York and Charleston to Bridgetown and Kingston, created novel financial and social opportunities for many women, high and low. In Jamaica, the relentless increase of overseas trade and slavery reached an apogee. By the mid-eighteenth century, the island had become a global entrepôt, a contested borderland, and a bastion of slavery. Its enviable position as the wealthiest colony in British America came at a tremendous cost in human life. Abolitionist Thomas Clarkson asserted that by 1768 an estimated 167,000 slaves lived on the island.² Free women played significant roles in advancing commerce and slavery in the colony. Rather than receding to the background, female colonists like Anna Hassall worked alongside parents and spouses and often assumed control of family businesses when husbands died. They were also

² Thomas Clarkson, *The History of the Rise, Progress and Accomplishment of the Abolition of the African Slave Trade by the British Parliament*, Vol. II (London: R. Taylor and Co., 1808), 357.

heavily invested in slavery, which enhanced—rather than diminished—women’s commercial activities.

The appearance of women like Anna Hassall in the archives contradicts traditional accounts of the rise of Atlantic slavery and modern capitalism. Conventionally, women play marginal roles in accounts of the globalizing early modern economy.³ Scholarship on women’s work has been largely disassociated from Atlantic slavery.⁴ As a result, the widely held assumption that slavery reduced women’s participation in the marketplace has endured. Accordingly, poorer or middling women are absent from most accounts of commerce in slaveholding societies.⁵ This chapter contends that women’s dependence upon slavery, as both a source of wealth and labor, fits hand in glove with their participation in an increasingly global economy. Instead of regulating women’s behaviors, free people invested their resources in surviving, making a profit, and maintaining control over a population of slaves who significantly outnumbered them. Eighteenth-century discourses about femininity and beliefs concerning normative gender roles did not constrain women’s business activities. Female colonists manifested a strong sense of themselves as active economic agents in the local, colonial, Atlantic, and global marketplace.

³ For scholarship on male merchants, Morgan, *Bristol and the Atlantic Trade in the Eighteenth Century*; Hancock, *Citizens of the World*; Brenner, *Merchants and Revolution*; Gauci, *Emporium of the World*.

⁴ Notable exceptions include: Mair, *A Historical Study of Women in Jamaica*; Hilary Beckles, “White Women and Slavery in the Caribbean,” *History Workshop Journal* 36 (1993): 66-82; Hartigan-O’Connor, *The Ties that Buy*.

⁵ Research on poor and middling women would “undermine notions” that the Caribbean colonies were “nothing more than armed camps of aggressive men, or machines for the making of fortunes quickly dissipated by the lavish lifestyles of absentee planters.” Zacek, “Between Lady and Slave,” 150.

Colonial Markets, Imperial Trades

In the eighteenth century, overseas commerce connected British territories in America to Europe, Asia, and Africa, and spurred the growth of port towns throughout the Atlantic world. Ships travelled frequently from ports in Boston, New York, and Kingston to Bristol, Dublin, and London, threading the colonies and the metropole together. Women on all levels of society throughout the Atlantic world depended upon access to imported goods, or the ability to sell exports overseas to support themselves and their families. Many worked out of necessity, some out of choice. The waters of the Atlantic community, of course, were constantly roiled by warfare in the long eighteenth century. Chronic warfare drove dramatic expansion of the British Army and Navy, not only claiming the lives of tens of thousands of men who participated in the military exploits of the Empire, but also profoundly shaping the lives of the women they left behind.⁶ Britain's military and economic growth placed new demands on the women who lived in port towns where more commercial work existed.⁷

Shifting the focus to women's economic activities is as revealing about the nature of the colonial economy as it is of early modern gender relations. The range of occupations women pursued shows the existence of a marketplace in Jamaica that was far more varied and diverse than has been typically understood. The predominance of scholarship on mercantile ventures and larger sugar plantations has overshadowed the lives of the "ordinary" colonist majority, many of whom were women and who lived in

⁶ Margaret Hunt contends that the massive demands of the army and the navy placed heavy burdens on the wives and mothers of many British families. *The Middling Sort*, 30-31.

⁷ Sheryllynne Haggerty highlights this trend in British port cities. Sixty-three percent of the men in London's East End were absent at any one time as a result of sea-related occupations. "Women, Work and the Consumer Revolution: Liverpool in the Late Eighteenth Century," in *A Nation of Shopkeepers: Five Centuries of British Retailing*, eds. John Benson and Laura Ugolini (London: I. B. Tauris, 2002), 109.

cities and towns. From renting out rooms and selling trinkets to embroidering dresses and raising chickens, women adapted to the contingencies of an economic environment that relied upon overseas trade. Some women, like Mary Nailer, purveyed an array of local groceries in their homes in Kingston, selling preserved ginger, limes, lemons, and oranges, pineapple jam, guava marmalade, and tamarinds.⁸ Similarly, widow Catherine Lowe worked as an apothecary and offered an assortment of imported “cures” including “purging elixir,” “Bateman’s drops,” vials of “King’s honey,” “British oil,” tooth powder, salt of wormwood, powdered “hart horn,” and rhubarb. Her customers could also purchase ink powder, lavender, starch, brass buttons, and paper pins at her shop in Kingston.⁹

Other women—like Frances Bendicks—ran taverns, offering alternative “cures” to local residents. Bendicks sought to entice customers to the grand re-opening of her tavern at “Fort Henderson” by noting she “had been at a considerable expense in repairing and fitting upon the place” and “in laying in a stock of liquors of the first quality.”¹⁰ In her efforts to attract an elite male clientele, Bendicks addressed herself to “those gentlemen who are pleased to honor her with their custom.” Widow Elizabeth Webster likewise retailed imported goods, including rolls of tobacco, pipes, loaves of sugar, candy, soap, bitters, and shoes from her tavern. The large list of kitchen implements owned by Webster—including iron and brass pots, saucepans and dripping pans, tea kettles, and a copper chocolate pot—suggest that she dispensed not only alcohol

⁸ *Jamaica Mercury*, May 15, 1779.

⁹ Inventory of Catherine Lowe, 1760, vol. 40, f. 173, JA.

¹⁰ *Jamaica Mercury*, May 15, 1779.

but also food, thus operating as a full-service inn, replete with “thirty old chairs” and three backgammon tables.¹¹

Whether by choice or by necessity, women headed a considerable number of households throughout the Atlantic world. Urban areas in Jamaica conformed to this pattern. Estate inventories and census records reveal that widows and “spinsters” congregated in the coastal towns of Kingston, Port Royal, and St. Jago de la Vega.¹² White women headed more than a quarter of households in Kingston alone.¹³ This ratio conformed to the gendered demographic pattern that came to define maritime communities throughout the Atlantic world. By the early eighteenth-century, an estimated twenty percent of households in poor, port-city neighborhoods in England were headed by women.¹⁴ Likewise, a significant number of women acted as household heads in coastal towns in Rhode Island, South Carolina, Antigua, and Barbados.¹⁵ This broader pattern suggests that patriarchal ideologies were prescriptive ideals rather than practical tools for family survival and success in maritime economies. While some of the wives and widows who single-handedly supported children in Jamaica were desperately poor, others gained independence and even affluence from their business activities.

The Spanish Town census of 1754, one of the few censuses that have survived from eighteenth-century Jamaica, shows that women held traditionally masculine

¹¹ Inventory of Elizabeth Webster, 1733, vol. 16, f. 119, JA.

¹² The wills made by 741 women and the 1,193 probated inventories of women’s estates indicate that the majority lived in Kingston, Spanish Town (St. Catherine Parrish) and Port Royal. Jamaica Wills, 1661-1770, vols. 1 to 38, IRO; probated inventories recorded by Trevor Burnard and used with his permission. Jamaica Inventories, 1674-1784, JA.

¹³ Trevor Burnard found that twenty-five to twenty-seven percent of householders in Kingston were white women during the period of 1745 to 1770. “Gay and Agreeable Ladies,” 31.

¹⁴ Hunt, *The Middling Sort*, 38.

¹⁵ Ellen Hartigan-O’Connor determined that women headed seventeen to twenty-one percent of the households in Newport, Rhode Island and Charleston, South Carolina. *The Ties that Buy*, 40. Similar trends were identified in Barbados, where white women outnumbered white men and many remained unmarried, and financially independent. Beckles, “White Women and Slavery in the Caribbean,” 70-71. Zacek’s study of a 1753 census from Antigua revealed similar patterns. “Between Lady and Slave,” 130.

positions of authority. They owned a significant portion of the property in the seat of the colonial government and an important political and social nexus on the island. Free women comprised more than one-third of the 390 people listed as “proprietors.” Fifteen percent of the free women were identified as “white,” while seventeen percent of the women were “negroes and mulattoes of free conditions.”¹⁶ Significantly, free women of color controlled more land than white women. In sum, roughly thirty percent of the population lived in households headed by women.¹⁷ As property owners and authority figures within families, women assumed the characteristics of patriarchs.

The census also reveals the diversity of women’s activities in an expanding imperial economy. Occupations were already segregated along racial lines by the mid-eighteenth century, it suggests. Approximately 100 of the 162 free women listed their occupations. Nearly all of the female planters and shopkeepers were described as “white.”¹⁸ Although women of color owned more property in town, most of them earned livings in lower-paying occupations, working as pastry cooks, washers, and poulterers.¹⁹ All thirty-one of the town’s seamstresses, the most prevalent female occupation, were of African descent.²⁰ However, being white was not a guarantee of financial success.

¹⁶ Sixty women were identified as “white” and sixty-seven women were identified as “negroes and mulattoes.” The label of “white” has been placed in quotations because people of African descent who obtained the status of “white” were listed in this group. “Spanish Town Census,” 1754, SAS/RF 20/7, ESRO.

¹⁷ 169 people lived in properties held by white women, while 204 people lived in properties owned by women of color. In *ibid.*

¹⁸ Twelve of the thirteen women who described themselves as planters and all five who worked as shopkeepers were listed as white. In *ibid.*

¹⁹ Three pastry cooks, four washers and three “powlterers” who raised poultry were “negroes and mulattoes of free condition.” In *ibid.*

²⁰ It is possible that many of these women were formerly slaves. Karol Weaver’s study of enslaved seamstresses in French colonies reveals that owners regularly had enslaved women trained to perform this highly skilled work. More research needs to be done to determine whether similar practices existed in British colonies. “Fashioning Freedom: Slave Seamstresses in the Atlantic World,” *Journal of Women's History* 24, no. 1 (2012): 44-59.

Almost all of the women who described themselves as “hucksters” were also white.²¹ Hucksters, who survived by peddling cheap goods on the streets, would have been the poorest of free women. Seamstresses, on the other hand, engaged in a more respected, high-paying trade. Furthermore, occupational segregation by race was far from absolute. Women of varied racial and ethnic backgrounds worked as schoolmistresses, midwives, and mantua makers. They frequently identified themselves as widows.²²

Legal records from the island’s Grand Court agree with the profile offered by the Spanish Town census. Disputes over unpaid debts, even for small amounts of money, were tried in the island’s Grand Court where women frequently appeared as both claimants and defendants. In addition to owning property and working in varied occupations, free women of European and African descent actively used the island’s legal system to collect on debts, and frequently won their suits against both women and men. Elizabeth Labruiso, a “free negro” woman, filed a complaint against a “Gentleman” named William Christopher who owed her £16 for the rental of a house she owned. The court ordered him to pay Labruiso £18 in damages as well as £6 as compensation for legal fees.²³ Catherine Brady, yet another a “free negro,” sued the widow Elizabeth Prothers for £6.4 in back-rent.²⁴ Mary Pullen, a free woman of color from Kingston, pursued a blacksmith, Robert Milburn, for a substantial debt of £71. These court records indicate that many women owned and rented property to tenants from diverse social backgrounds.

²¹ The numerous enslaved women who also worked as “hucksters” were not accounted for in this survey.

²² This evidence indicates that women of African descent were not barred from legal marriage, as has been assumed by scholars. Instead, they claimed the legal rights and the social respect that widowhood entailed.

²³ Elizabeth Eldred v. William Balanco; John Becquot v. Mary Dudley; Elizabeth Labruiso v. William Christopher. All cases taken from the Grand Court Records, May 1761, vol. 71, JA.

²⁴ Catherine Brady v. Elizabeth Prothers, in *ibid*.

The varied backgrounds of the women who successfully sued in the Grand Court to collect on debts suggests that legal officials sought to preserve fair market transactions, which relied upon the availability of personal credit. They were less concerned with using the court as a vehicle to uphold masculine privileges, or to segregate free people by race or religion.²⁵ As scholars have demonstrated, the growth of early-modern British trade depended upon the willingness of individuals to extend paper credit to each other. In this developing credit economy, perceptions of one's reputation or "character" were of central importance to establishing creditworthiness.²⁶ In Jamaica, women who commanded cash, property, and goods acted as creditors and debtors. They initiated a myriad of small and large transactions that knitted the colony into a larger empire funded by the extension of personal credit in an increasingly impersonal marketplace.

Unlike the Chancery Court, which handled cases involving large estates, the Grand Court functioned like a small claims court. Financial disagreements brought together a diverse group of colonists, where poor widows rubbed shoulders with prominent men. Consider, for instance, the widow Elizabeth Eldred who pursued a tavern keeper for a promissory note worth £7.1.²⁷ John Becquot, a "gentleman" and attorney in the island's Supreme Court, sued a widow named Mary Dudley for £35.7 "for his extraordinary labor and care as her attorney."²⁸ Shopkeeper Elizabeth Metcalfe sought to

²⁵ Zacek's contention that her study of poor and middling white women in the Leeward Islands "allows us to reconceptualize these societies in terms beyond the oversimplified binary oppositions of white and black, enslaved and free" applies equally to the social nuances of colonial Jamaican society. "Between Lady and Slave," 138.

²⁶ Margaret Hunt describes a credit economy, which was predicated upon personal connections. *Middling Sort*, 31. Peter Mathias concurs that access to credit and cash in a hazardous and unpredictable marketplace was central to survival. "Risk, Credit and Kinship in Early Modern Enterprise," in *The Early Modern Atlantic Economy*, eds. John J. McCusker and Kenneth Morgan (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2001), 23.

²⁷ Elizabeth Eldred v. William Balanco, Grand Court Records, May 1761, vol. 71, JA.

²⁸ John Becquot v. Mary Dudley, in *ibid*.

recover a bond for £31 that she had contracted with the planter Simon Fancey.²⁹ Ester Pearson, a “merchant” of Bristol, filed suit alongside her male business partner Robert Brady against a surgeon in Jamaica.³⁰ Jewish merchant Daniel Lopez expressed animosity towards the widow Rebecca Desilva, another member of the colony’s large Jewish community, claiming that she had “craftily defrauded him.” Apparently, Lopez paid her £108 for the purchase of “12 pipes” (approximately 1,500 gallons) of lime juice, which she never delivered to him.³¹

A closer look at the Spanish Town census confirms the fact that women regularly traversed the boundaries of gender, race, status, and religion. Christian women did business with Jewish men. Approximately one third of the town’s white female proprietors rented properties to male tenants, with names such as Emanuel Mendes, Moses DeCordova, and Solomon Correa.³² Free women of African descent also did business with Jewish men. Carpenter Robert Harbin sued Esther Bragg, a “free mulatto woman,” and the gentleman Isaac Bitero for the return of a £46 promissory note that he made out to them. Shopkeeper Isaac Desilva brought a case against a “free mulatto woman” named Dorothy Plummer for £10, while Moses Levy Alvarez complained that Elizabeth Brown, a “free negro woman,” owed him £6.³³ It is possible that socially marginalized and economically hard-up women were less selective about whom they

²⁹ Elizabeth Metcalfe v. Simon Fancey, in *ibid*.

³⁰ William Smith, factor of Robert Brady and Ester Pearson, merchants, v. John Bell, Grand Court Records, 1743, vol. 41, JA.

³¹ Daniel Lopeze v. Rebecca Desilva, Grand Court Records, in *ibid*.

³² The majority of the Jewish people in the colony were descendents of the Jews who fled Portugal and Spain in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries to escape persecution. Jews were granted religious freedom in Jamaica, but the local government imposed a higher tax on them early in the eighteenth century. For more on this subject see the correspondence to the Lords of Trade and Plantations, including: 1690-91, CO 137/2, f. 209; 1699, CO 137/5, f. 55; 1715, CO 137/10, f. 355; 1721-22, CO 137/14, f. 6. NAE.

³³ Robert v. Esther Bragg and Isaac Bitero; Mary Pullen v. Robert Milburn; Isaac Desilva v. Dorothy Plummer; Moses Levy Alvarez v. Elizabeth Brown. Grand Court Records, May 1761, vol. 71, JA.

transacted business with. Whatever the case, the frequency with which such women appeared in court over matters of credit and debt indicates they, too, were essential players, rather than minor actors in the marketplace.

Though many of the women working in the marketplace were unmarried, marriage did not necessarily exclude them from commerce. In Britain and the American colonies, women could obtain the permission of husbands to operate as independent or "feme sole" economic agents.³⁴ The earliest instance of a woman using this status in Jamaica occurred in 1678 when Thomas Boutwell pursued Alice Brocky, a "feme sole merchant," for an £7 debt that she owed him.³⁵ Similarly, in 1680, a married woman named Ann Inge, "who tradeth by herself," was understood to be an independent economic actor by the court.³⁶ This legal status overrode the restrictions that coverture impressed upon married women, and enabled them to extend credit or contract debts under their own names.

Such women generally married earlier than men and tended to outlive them; they frequently transitioned between feme sole and feme covert. Technically, marriage absolved women of the legal responsibility for paying debts they had previously contracted, placing the burden on their husbands. However, the economic status of a married woman was more ambiguous than the strictures of coverture allowed for. In one instance, Elizabeth Etough pursued John Basnett for a large sum of money (£775) which she had lent to him while a widow. She did so independently, without the aid of her new

³⁴ See Marylynn Salmon's discussion of feme sole traders in colonial America. *Women and the Law of Property in Early America*, 44-53.

³⁵ Thomas Boutwell v. Alice Brocky, Grand Court Records, 1680, vol. 1, JA.

³⁶ Ann Inge v. Nicolas Law, in *ibid.*

husband.³⁷ John Southerne accused Hannah Groves of contracting £19 “for diverse wares” and “merchandise” from him while she was “sole,” and subsequently complained that Groves refused to pay him while she was single and after she remarried.³⁸ The 1754 census and legal records together construct an economic world in which women were integral—rather than marginal—participants. Some even assumed typically male positions in the local government. Dorothy Petingall worked as a bailiff, appearing in the records when John Fountaine disputed an £78 sum she had collected from him. Petingall, Fountaine, and the court described the “accounts between them” as “difficult and tedious,” requesting that two independent men survey all of the books and papers related to the case.³⁹

As Jamaica’s colonists grappled with a rapidly changing economic and social landscape, they prioritized survival and profit. Commercial interests overrode the cultural impetus to circumscribe women’s economic activities. Women capitalized on the financial opportunities that were generated by this financial environment by pursuing alternative means of supporting themselves. Greater economic responsibility beyond the household went hand in hand with increased authority within the household. Unmarried women who acted as heads of households, either by necessity or by choice, possessed the same legal rights as men. Furthermore, those who ran financially successful business ventures had the money to sustain social as well as legal independence.

³⁷ Joseph Etough and Elizabeth his wife v. John Basnett, Grand Court Records, December 28, 1743, vol. 41, JA.

³⁸ The exact dates for cases tried in the Grand Court were usually not recorded in the transcriptions. Likewise, f. numbers are inaccurate or missing. Most of the volumes of Grand Court records are considered to be too fragile for research. I was only permitted to review three of the volumes held at the Jamaica Archives. Even so, this small sampling suggests a high frequency with which women appears in the colony’s Grand Court. John Southerne v. Hannah and Thomas Groves, Grand Court Records, 1680, vol. 1, JA.

³⁹ Dorothy Petingall v. John Fountaine, in *ibid.*

Recent studies of women's activities in the early modern marketplace support such a conclusion. Among Dutch women who worked as merchants and traders in seventeenth-century New Netherland, "gender did not determine participation" in trade.⁴⁰ Esther Pinheiro, a Jewish widow from Nevis, bears a striking resemblance to many of the Jamaican women studied here. When her husband died, he made Esther his sole legatee, after which she assumed command of his "vibrant commercial network." Pinheiro's Atlantic mercantile activities were extensive: her vessels traveled between New York, New England, Britain, and the Leeward Islands.⁴¹ Similarly, the ventures initiated by Jean d'Entremeuse—a Frenchwoman whose mercantile reach stretched even further to the Indian Ocean—connected Portuguese, Spanish, and French colonies.⁴² Thus, the circumstances of a certain time period, rather than a particular country's legal and cultural values, enabled early modern women to assume considerable financial and social independence.

The best example of such an enterpriser on the island was Anna Hassall. Coming of age and marrying into this world of ever expanding geographic, economic, and cultural boundaries, she was already well versed in how to operate a transnational mercantile venture when her husband died in 1748. Hassall grew up at the elbow of her widowed mother, Sarah Shanks, who managed a considerable trading operation importing textiles and finished goods to Jamaica. When Shanks travelled to Britain to manage her family's business affairs there, her daughter Anna accompanied her, leaving behind her son-in-law

⁴⁰ Kim Todt and Martha Dickson Shattuck, "Capable Entrepreneurs: the Women Merchants of New Netherland," *Women in Port*, 184-185.

⁴¹ Zacek, "Between Lady and Slave," 133.

⁴² Ernst Pijning, "Can She Be a Woman? Gender and Contraband in the Revolutionary Atlantic," *Women in Port*, 215-250.

to oversee the Jamaican side of the family's sugar business.⁴³ However, she decided to return to the island in 1737 when his health began to fail, writing: "I shall not put my affairs in any other hand." As a widow, Shanks ultimately commanded legal authority over her family's enterprise. Rather than have the venture fall into "other hands," she perceived of herself as the most competent person to assume control. Shanks's gendered position did not factor into her sense of business confidence.

After returning to Kingston and "hating idleness," Shanks expanded her trading activities beyond sugar. She began to import British textiles and other manufactures to the colony from her friend Ann Birkin, who lived in Bristol and acted as Shanks's business agent there.⁴⁴ The two women had experience working as mercers, or retailers of woven fabrics, and so possessed an exhaustive knowledge of textiles, their costs, and their producers.⁴⁵ One letter Shanks sent to Birkin detailed items she wanted at Bristol's "July Fair," including "rich porto bello flower silk," "rich hair cull damask," silk hose, "fashionable" wax necklaces, women's "fine white glaz'd lamb," gilt brushes, forehead combs, and "fashionable curls."⁴⁶ Shanks must have made purchases from wholesalers at the "July Fair" before, since she directed Birkin to order "fine Holland wale-bone hoop coats" from "Miss Gallbraith the person I used to buy them from." She then completed her meticulous shopping list with a personal request for "genteel fashionable flowere'd silk" for her daughter Anna and silk stockings and white gloves for herself. Though

⁴³ Sarah Shanks's maiden name is unknown. Her husband, Edward Shanks was christened on May 29, 1683 in Alnwick, Northumberland, England. Sarah Shanks is also listed as the wife for the christenings of three children: Richard (December 23, 1712) Mary (June 22, 1714) and Anna (December 8, 1715) in Lesbury, Northumberland, England. See "England, Births and Christenings, 1538-1975," www.familysearch.org.

⁴⁴ Shanks instructed her factors in Bristol to work with Birkin to ship the goods overseas. Sarah Shanks to Fisher & Co., May 26, 1740, GD 1/32/33, NAS.

⁴⁵ The *Oxford English Dictionary* defines a mercer is defined as "a person who deals in textile fabrics, esp. silks, velvets, and other fine materials."

⁴⁶ Sarah Shanks to Ann Birkin, May 26, 1740, GD 1/32/33, NAS.

Birkin found it “very difficult” to complete the extensive order, she nevertheless vowed to make it her “whole study to get it all at y best rate.”⁴⁷

As importers and retailers of fashionable textiles and accessories, Shanks and Birkin followed a pursuit sustained by female labor. In the eighteenth century, women were the chief owners of millinery shops in the Anglo-Atlantic world.⁴⁸ In addition to purveying textiles, hats, jewelry, and other accessories, female seamstresses and tailors manufactured much of women’s clothing.⁴⁹ The cheapness and plethora of clothing today has blunted our appreciation of the monetary value of hand-woven textiles and hand-tailored garments during the early modern period, but engaging in the commerce of textiles—especially linen—was freighted not only with financial but also political significance. As Kathleen Brown has observed, England laid the “material foundations” for its cultural empire through the exportation of manufactured goods to America.⁵⁰ Female mercers in America both bolstered the demand for British manufactures and transmitted their symbolic meanings to local consumers.

⁴⁷ Ann Birkin to Sarah Shanks, September 1740, GD 1/32/33, NAS.

⁴⁸ Important studies have been done on women’s engagement with the textile industry in early America and Europe. However, the activities of free and enslaved women who worked in this industry in the Caribbean have received little attention. Kate Haulman, *Politics of Fashion in Eighteenth-Century America* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2011); Laurel Thatcher Ulrich, “Wheels, Looms and the Gender Division of Labor in Eighteenth-Century New England,” *WMQ* 55, no. 1 (1998): 3-38; Marla Miller, “Gender, Artisanry, and Craft Tradition in Early New England: The View through the Eye of a Needle,” *WMQ* 60, no. 4 (2003): 743-776; Beverly Lemire, *Dress, Culture and Commerce: The English Clothing Trade before the Factory, 1660-1800* (New York: Palgrave MacMillan, 1997); Claire Crowston, *Fabricating Women: The Seamstress of Old Regime France, 1675-1791* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2001); Jennifer Michelle Jones, *Sexing La Mode: Gender, Fashion and Commercial Culture in Old Regime France* (Oxford: Berg Publishers, 2004).

⁴⁹ Amanda Vickery explains that, in the seventeenth century, tailors made clothing for men and women. However, the popularity of the mantua, a garment worn solely by women, led to a bifurcation of the profession, with female mantua makers and seamstresses serving female customers. *Behind Closed Doors*, 122.

⁵⁰ Kathleen Brown, *Foul Bodies: Cleanliness in Early America* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2009), 100-101.

Soon after the settlement of Jamaica, women assumed prominent roles as importers and retailers of textiles and accessories. In 1684, “spinster” Mary Philips sold ribbons, silk stockings, fans, and muslins from a store in Port Royal. The inventories of other female mercers on the island reveal a vast trading network, as well. They retailed printed cotton cloth produced in continental Europe, the Middle East, and India.⁵¹ In addition to serge, “ghent Holland,” and “scotch cloth,” Johanna Armstrong, another “sole dealer” in Port Royal, sold Persian silk, “garlix,” “callico,” “water bengall,” chintz, printed linen, and flowered petticoats at the turn of the century. Her amassment of goods by the time of her death, including the odd box of fishhooks and parcel of crucibles, was valued at £338.⁵² Women continued to earn a living by importing, retailing, and crafting fashionable items in succeeding decades. Kingston shop owner Mary Hobkirk sold thread, girls’ caps, hats, bonnets, and cloaks, all “of the newest fashion,” as well as gauze aprons, black, white and blue ostrich feathers, quilted coats, black lace, men’s and women’s buckskin gloves and shoes, children’s toys, and green silk umbrellas.⁵³ Another mercer, Mary Manton, purveyed a bewildering array of imported manufactures, including hats and stockings for both men and women, “holland” cloth, baby linen, ozenbrig cloth, raw silk, clasp knives, penknives, scissors, necklaces, soap, buttons, and cinnamon.⁵⁴

As mercers built up the stock of both cloth and accessories, critiques of fashion as frivolous, fleeting, and feminine arose. These contemporary gendered characterizations have shaped the narratives that explain the growth of the Atlantic marketplace, which

⁵¹ For more on cotton production and trade, see Giorgio Riello, *Cotton: The Fabric that Made the Modern World* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2013); Beverly Lemire, *Cotton* (New York: Bloomsbury Academic, 2011).

⁵² Inventory of Johanna Armstrong, 1702, Jamaica Inventories, vol. 5, f. 171, JA.

⁵³ *Jamaica Mercury*, Kingston, August 27, 1779.

⁵⁴ Inventory of Mary Martin, 1741, Jamaica Inventories, vol. 21, f. 163, JA.

focus on colonially produced goods such as sugar and tobacco that were primarily traded by men. Studying the economic and symbolic importance of textiles to early modern society allows us to question this account.⁵⁵ Early modern men and women used fashion as a potent means of signifying social status, lineage, and wealth. Estate inventories show that expensive cloth could be worth its weight in gold. Eighteenth-century novels abound with male and female protagonists who were indebted to their tailors. Fashion had the additional power to convey one's mastery of taste and provided an entrée into polite society.⁵⁶

The cultural significance of clothing and fashion to early modern people underscores the importance of women's roles in this industry. Not only were they significant consumers and primary purchasers for households; they were central to the import and the distribution of fashionable goods and the elaboration of the meanings attached to them. Indeed, the promise of profiting from the textile trade in Jamaica lured two single British women in the 1770's, "Mrs. Finlayson" and "Miss McIntosh," who opened up a mantua-making and hat-making business. Believing the colony would be a profitable place to sell fashionable female garments, they promoted their knowledge of the "prevailing taste in England" to potential customers. They sought to capitalize on their connections to the cosmopolitan metropole, from which they received "the earliest intelligence of every change of the fashion."⁵⁷

⁵⁵ There is a growing body of scholarship on gender, fashion, and taste during the eighteenth century. See Kate Haulman, *Politics of Fashion*; Robert Jones, *Gender and the Formation of Taste in Eighteenth-Century Britain: The Analysis of Beauty* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2009); Jennifer Jones, *Sexing La Mode*; Maxine Berg, *Luxury and Pleasure in Eighteenth-Century Britain* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2007).

⁵⁶ Clean linen, in particular, became an emblem of gentility in the Anglo-Atlantic world. Brown, *Foul Bodies*, 109. Women were the guardians of clean linen: the "universal mark of personal cleanliness, dignity and self-respect." Vickery, *Behind Closed Doors*, 122.

⁵⁷ *Jamaica Mercury*, June 19, 1779.

Women like Finlayson and McIntosh, who imported to and retailed items in America bolstered the British manufacturing industry. They created demand for the buttons, scissors, hats, gloves, stockings, and thread produced abroad. Women not only stimulated trans-Atlantic market growth, they also helped to create jobs in Britain. While some scholars contend that working with textiles consigned women to low paying jobs, this line of trade was lucrative for some.⁵⁸ Successful merchants, mercers, and milliners were by no means impoverished, nor were they reduced surviving on the margins of the Atlantic economy. The male and female customers of Mary Philips, who sold British manufactures in Kingston, owed her £552 when she died in 1684.⁵⁹ Her estate was valued at £609, ranking solidly in the upper echelons of middling status, if not among the wealthy. Similarly, another Kingston widow named Mary Skipp retailed vast quantities of imported textiles, including cambrick, Holland, cherry and rose-colored silk, green Venetian silk, black and white print calicoes, India chintz, and lawn, as well as children's shoes, ribbons, and pins.⁶⁰

The contents of Skipp's home manifested her education, wealth, and taste. She owned a "scritore" or writing desk, suggestive of some literacy and her membership in an Atlantic epistolary culture.⁶¹ Customers probably sat in her walnut and leather chairs as they examined yards of fabric, agonizing over the right colors and textures for dresses and waistcoats. She may have entertained them with games of whist at her card tables

⁵⁸ Sheryllynne Haggerty contends that working with textiles provided low wage jobs for women in Philadelphia. Haggerty focused on seamstresses and mantua makers whereas this chapter investigates female merchants, mercers, and milliners. This may explain the disparity between women's financial success in Philadelphia and Jamaica. "Ports, Petticoats, and Power?" *Women and Work in Early-National Philadelphia*, 113-114.

⁵⁹ Inventory of Mary Phillips, 1684, vol. 2, f. 55, JA.

⁶⁰ Inventory of Mary Skipp, 1740, vol. 21, f. 144, JA.

⁶¹ For a detailed study of the meanings conveyed by women's writing desks, see Dena Goodman, *Becoming a Woman*.

while her slaves, Celia and Amey, made them tea. It appears that Skipp had a penchant for collecting jewelry, for she owned diamond, emerald, garnet, and topaz rings, a diamond girdle buckle, a gold watch, and a pearl necklace, and possibly used these wares as a display of wealth for strategic business purposes, simultaneously dazzling potential clients and reassuring potential lenders. Skipp furnished her home with exotic “India prints” and “India” tea tables. As a merchant, she had the ability to acquire items from distant lands like India and bring them to the Caribbean. She and other female merchants in Jamaica imported and sold goods produced in continental Europe, the Middle East, and India. Their business operations were surprisingly global. Many sold Indian textiles such as “callico,” “water bengall,” and “India chintz.” These looser, lighter fabrics were more suitable for the hot, humid Caribbean climate than British-manufactured woolens. By importing such goods, female merchants helped bind together the trading ties between East and West and forge an international trading community.

Sarah Shanks and her daughter, Anna Hassall, were contemporaries of Mary Skipp. They too shipped textiles manufactured in Europe and India to the island. Unlike Skipp, however, they did not retail these goods to local customers. Instead, mother and daughter took advantage of living in a colony that was prominent to the Caribbean and in close proximity to Spanish territory. As an expert importer of the manufactures that Spanish colonists desired, with easy and reliable shipments from Britain, Shanks was well situated to re-export British products from Jamaica to Spanish-speaking areas in the Caribbean. Accordingly, she grew increasingly attentive to the possibilities of supply. A

letter to one supplier in Bristol reads: “you have all sorts of goods fitt for the Spanish trade.”⁶²

Jamaica’s strategic geographic location made the island a favored haunt of pirates, privateers, and merchants alike, who all sought to profit from the licit and illicit flow of goods and slaves to New Spain.⁶³ Contraband goods and money were channeled through the island’s ports where Shanks, along with other traders, participated in the prosperous “Spanish trade.” Shanks’s supply of the Spanish colonies as an import-export merchant of British goods to Spanish consumers, along with her separate sugar sales, proved to be profitable. However, they were also vulnerable to military conflict. The economic and strategic importance of the highly valuable Caribbean made it a hotly contested area, as European states vied for control over its bullion and sugar.⁶⁴ The wars that broke out between Britain and its European rivals frequently disrupted trade throughout the region, making trade to New Spain risky and costly. During times of war the cost of imports soared in all colonies, while sugar and rum lay unshipped in Jamaican storehouses.

Accordingly, women who engaged in the Atlantic trades closely monitored political and military developments in Europe, for they directly influenced their ability to obtain or sell goods. As Shanks exported sugar from Jamaica, she constantly eyed the market in Britain, asking agents like Birkin for “ye exactest intelligence” on sugar prices. Birkin would return in the cargoes that she sent to Shanks newspapers and lists of current prices in Britain to “amuse” her. Both women understood, of course, that amusement was not their purpose. An adept trader, Shanks used this information to determine whether it

⁶² Sarah Shanks to Fisher & Co., January 6, 1740, GD 1/32/33, NAS.

⁶³ Nuala Zahedieh, “‘The Wickedest City in the World’: Port Royal, Commercial Hub of the Seventeenth-Century Caribbean,” in *Working Slavery, Pricing Freedom: Perspectives from the Caribbean, Africa and the African Diaspora*, ed. Verene Sheperd (Kingston: Ian Randle Publishers, 2002).

⁶⁴ Amussen, *Caribbean Exchanges*, 38-39.

would be more profitable to sell locally or to export.⁶⁵ In December 1740, Birkin informed Shanks that a war between Britain and France was imminent and that the cost of sugar would increase considerably, for the price of rum had already risen to “seven shillings a gallon” there. Birkin also passed on the news that Parliament passed an act that prohibited the shipment of all provisions to Jamaica, except for the two staples of an enslaved person’s diet: rice and fish.⁶⁶ Circumstances like the possibility of war were expensive but not dire for merchants like Shanks, as long as they stayed abreast of imperial politics.

Gender and Business Relations

Diachronic characterizations of finance and warfare as masculine have obscured the commercial activities of women like Sarah Shanks. However, she did operate in a mercantile world largely run by men. Shanks and Birkin shared many commonalities: they were both unmarried, involved in trade, and it is possible they even grew up together. Whatever the case, business activities were central to their relationship. Shanks entrusted Birkin with a bond worth £500 and gave permission to draw on it to pay for goods purchased for Shanks in Bristol.⁶⁷ For any service rendered, she paid Birkin a commission. Theirs was a classic agent/principal merchandising arrangement. Yet, their friendship manifested personal as well as financial elements. On one occasion, Birkin asked Shanks to send her a “pot” of green peppers in lieu of a commission. Shanks also shared intimate concerns with Birkin, as when in 1740 she expressed doubts that she

⁶⁵ Sarah Shanks to Ann Birkin, January 6, 1740, GD 1/32/33, NAS; Sarah Shanks to Ann Birkin, January 27, 1740, in *ibid*.

⁶⁶ Ann Birkin to Sarah Shanks, December 17, 1740, GD 1/32/33, NAS.

⁶⁷ Sarah Shanks to David Delany, January 26, 1739, in *ibid*; Ann Birkin, “Anna Hassall, Book of Receipts from Purchases in London,” October 8, 1739, GD 1/32/34, NAS.

would ever see Britain again.⁶⁸ Shanks died the following year, four years after returning to Jamaica. Not surprisingly, she named Birkin the executrix of her will in Britain, further emphasizing the confidence she had placed in her trans-Atlantic partner.⁶⁹

Women like Birkin and Shanks possessed the same kind of financial and personal friendship that scholars have identified as characteristic of male merchants engaging in Atlantic trade. During the early modern period, personal connections were central to most business activity. Before the advent of commercial banking, people had to draw on lines of credit, write bonds, and obtain mortgages from other individuals. As Peter Mathias has observed, the early modern European market lacked the elemental preconditions for the successful conduct of most legitimate business, and so placed a higher premium on personal trust and the “kinship nexus” than did more modern enterprise.⁷⁰ In the absence of institutional banking, credit rating, and professional auditing, personal knowledge of one’s reputation was an essential condition for the extension of capital and credit.⁷¹ The alliance between Shanks and Birkin also illustrates how the line between personal, emotional friendships and impersonal, business partnerships became blurred. Indeed, personal connections were often essential to financial relationships, and vice versa. As colonial wills tell us, women were more likely to share these kinds of ties with other women. Unmarried women typically preferred to bequeath their assets to other female

⁶⁸ Sarah Shanks to Ann Birkin, January 6, 1740, GD 1/32/33, NAS.

⁶⁹ Birkin brought Shanks’s will to the Prerogative Court of Canterbury in November 1741. “Mrs. Ann Birkin, Admin. of Mrs. Sarah Shanks deceased” included a list of expenses paid by Birkin related to the administration of the will. This document is filed under Arthur Hassall’s “misc. receipts,” October, 1741, NAS.

⁷⁰ Mathias, “Risk, Credit and Kinship,” 17.

⁷¹ Mathias elaborates: “Reputation, standing, status in the trade depended upon the perceptions of others... There was no distinction to be made between the firm and the person in this respect, as there was none in law.” “Risk, Credit and Kinship,” 29.

relations and friends.⁷² Shanks adhered to colonial custom and made her daughter Anna primary heir and sole executrix of her estate. In doing so, she ensured that control of her business would remain in female hands.⁷³

However, the significance of same-sex business relations should not be overstated. Shanks and the other women of commerce more often than not engaged with men in financial and commercial matters, and such men gave no indication that conducting business with females was unusual.⁷⁴ Nevertheless, women's business correspondence reveals how gender differences influenced financial relationships. For instance, Shanks earned money from a mortgage that she contracted with a wealthy planter, Richard Elletson, who was frequently late in his payments to her; in 1741, shortly before she died, Shanks complained to Birkin that she had not received one shilling from him.⁷⁵ Yet, she employed a markedly different tone when writing to Elletson. In one letter, Shanks affected a deferential stance, apologizing to Elletson for her shortcomings in entertaining his wife, who had visited her in Bristol; she felt, she alleged, "a great uneasiness...least it should in any degree bring upon me your displeasure, or the ladies resentment."⁷⁶ For Shanks needed the income from the property that she mortgaged to Elletson and could not risk offending him. The Elletsons were of a higher social status than Shanks.

Accordingly, she flattered him and attempted to elicit his pity, as when in 1738 she wrote

⁷² Approximately seventy percent of the people who were identified as "friends" and offered legacies in women's wills were female. Jamaica Wills, 1665-1757, vols. 1 to 31, IRO.

⁷³ Will of Sarah Shanks, October 5, 1739, vol. 23, IRO.

⁷⁴ Men were accustomed to dealing with widows and married women who operated as "sole traders." For more on the history of women and work in Early Modern England, see: Judith Bennett, *Ale, Beer, and Brewsters in England: Women's Work in a Changing World* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1999); Patricia Crawford, Laura Gowing, eds. *Women's Worlds in Seventeenth-Century England: A Sourcebook* (New York: Routledge, 2000); Hunt, *The Middling Sort*.

⁷⁵ Richard Elletson's mortgage debts to Shanks would be passed on to her daughter Anna when she died. Anna's husband, Arthur Hassall, pursued Richard Elletson for £400 in debts. Hassall v. Elletson, Grand Court Records, 1743, vol. 41, JA.

⁷⁶ Sarah Shanks to Richard Elletson, February 4, 1738, GD 1/32/33, NAS.

him that “a short reflection must bring a gentleman of your understanding to be sensible my little fortune obliges me to keep it all in service to provide the common necessary’s of life.”⁷⁷

Shanks carefully steered between delicacy and firmness in correspondence. Though she was neither impoverished nor weak, Shanks identified herself with the gendered trope of the poor widow in order to shame Elletson into repaying her. In one letter, she claimed that her circumstances required her “to be more anxious than one of a liberall fortune, and more exact in my collections than I could wish to be.”⁷⁸ Her financial constraints, she declared when back in Bristol, forced her to “petition for a continuance of your usual care in remitting from Jamaica,” asking Elletson to pay her in bills of exchange instead of sugar. She further wrote: “I am a woman and unacquainted with the management of goods.” That was far from the truth. Her references to gender were mainly performative. Though neither party believed Shanks to be “unacquainted” with trade goods, she could not portray herself as Elletson’s equal. She invoked her gender as a means of acknowledging social expectations of feminine deference before turning to practical financial matters. Not surprisingly, she included in the same letter instructions for Elletson to send sugar “on the first ships for Bristol, consigned to my self; but not until you have advised me by some ship for London; or Bristol, that insurance may be made thereon.”⁷⁹ Shanks also apologized to Elletson for being “too warm.” She hoped that her display of emotion would not prevent him from “the dispatch of business in the

⁷⁷ Sarah Shanks to Richard Elletson, February 4, 1738, GD 1/32/33, NAS.

⁷⁸ Linda Sturtz identifies a parallel rhetorical strategy in Anna Eliza Elletson’s letters. “The ‘Dimduke’ and the Duchess of Chandos: Gender and Power in Jamaican Plantation Management-A Case Study or, A Different Story of ‘A Man [and his wife] from a Place Called Hope,’” *Revista/Review Interamericana* 29 (1999): 1-11.

⁷⁹ Sarah Shanks to Richard Elletson, February 4, 1738, GD 1/32/33, NAS.

beginning of the crop.”⁸⁰ She may have been excessively emotional from time to time, but her usage of sentimental language to discuss financial matters reveals her mastery of letter-writing conventions, as it adopts a distinctively feminine voice. Shanks employed the epistolary conventions that were expected in both eighteenth-century business and early modern female correspondence, mediating between emotional rhetoric and practical issues.⁸¹ Her correspondence was composed at a particular cultural moment when an emphasis on politeness and self-control was giving way to a cultivation of sentiment that occurred on both sides of the Atlantic.⁸² Shanks used a polite mode of expression in her description of Elletson as a “gentleman” of “understanding,” and then portrayed herself as the sentimental figure of the poor widow, placing Elletson in the position of the sympathetic reader who needed to be “sensible” to her plight.

Richard Elletson was not the only man with whom Sarah Shanks conducted business. Indeed, her business relationship with the wealthy Kingston merchant Arthur Hassall was of far greater importance: it was this relationship which probably laid the groundwork for her daughter Anna’s marriage to him in the same year that she died.⁸³

⁸⁰ Ibid.

⁸¹ For more on merchants and the discourse of feeling in business correspondence see Toby Ditz, “Shipwrecked; or, Masculinity Imperiled: Mercantile Representation of Failure and the Gendered Self in Eighteenth-Century Philadelphia,” *Journal of American History* 81, no. 1 (1994): 51-80.

⁸² Sarah Knott suggests that while polite modes of behavior stressed wit and self-mastery, sentimental writers used sensibility to engage the vicarious sympathy of readers. *Sensibility and the American Revolution* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2008), 55-58. The scholarship on epistolary writing and the republic of letters in the early modern period is extensive. Sarah Pearsell, *Atlantic Families: Lives and Letters in the Later Eighteenth Century* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2011); Dena Goodman, *Becoming a Woman*; Gary Schneider, *The Culture of Epistolarity: Vernacular Letters and Letter Writing in Early Modern England, 1500-1700* (Newark: University of Delaware Press, 2005); Eve Bannet, *Empire of Letters: Letter Manuals and Transatlantic Correspondence, 1688-1820* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2006); Anna Bryson, *From Courtesy to Civility: Changing Codes of Conduct in Early Modern England* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1998); David Shields, *Civil Tongues and Polite Letters in British America* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1997).

⁸³ Sarah Shanks to Fisher & Co., January 6, 1740, GD 1/32/33, NAS; Arthur Hassall was listed as a “merchant and factor” to Julies Beckford and William Willy. Beckford was a member of one of the wealthiest families from Jamaica. The Beckfords gained considerable political power in Britain. Grand Court Records, 1743, vol. 41, JA.

Marriage played an important role in an increasingly global business world that continued to rely upon personal relationships. As a member of the merchant community in Jamaica, Shanks may have presented her daughter as a suitable spouse to Hassall.⁸⁴ Furthermore, as a widow who possessed the sole right to her family estate, Shanks had a position of both authority and income. She could bequeath her family's estate to whomever she chose, and in the end determined to make her youngest daughter, Anna, her primary heir and sole executrix.

Anna Shanks's marriage at the age of twenty-six to Arthur Hassall intertwined business as well as personal concerns. Mother, daughter, and future husband probably shared an understanding that Hassall would allow Anna to continue operating her mother's enterprise during marriage, even though—once married—Anna became subject to the common law of coverture, which ceded to the husband full legal control of any assets brought to the marriage. However, Shanks's prior business ties to Hassall ensured that a trusted, wealthy, and well-connected man would not assume this position of authority over her daughter. Following their wedding, Hassall made no attempt to exercise his patriarchal right over his wife's economic affairs or to stop or frustrate her commercial dealings.

The Hassall marriage suggests that, in the colonial context, requiring women to conform to contemporary gender ideals paled in comparison to pursuing profit. In order to prosper in a highly unstable marketplace, Shanks and Hassall prioritized their mutual economic interests as merchants above their gender difference.⁸⁵ Rather than lose a

⁸⁴ Richard Grassby stresses the importance of marriage within the merchant community of Britain. *Kinship and Capitalism*, 47.

⁸⁵ Mathias contended that marriages "cemented alliances between families with close business interests." "Risk, Credit and Kinship," 17, 19.

valuable trading partner when Shanks died, Hassall gained a new one by marrying her daughter. Throughout her marriage, Anna Hassall continued to trade to the Spanish territories as her mother had. Two years after the wedding, she insured £1,079 of goods, which she shipped from Jamaica to Porto Bello in Panama.⁸⁶ In return, she received £183 of “Spanish coined silver” and forty ounces of “ball gold,” along with other Spanish and Portuguese coin.⁸⁷

Anna Hassall’s trading activities were plagued by the same high degree of risk that her mother had to contend with. The Asiento agreement between Britain and Spain did not minimize the disruptive and dangerous effects of warfare on trade.⁸⁸ Military conflicts, alongside the depredation of privateering and weather, created problems for merchants like Shanks and Hassall who traded across British and Spanish borders. In 1745, Hassall received £63 from her insurers to compensate for a “loss” incurred on a trading voyage to the “Spanish coast” made by her sloop, *The Ranger*. A year later, she won a suit in the colony’s Chancery Court to recover £165 in losses that occurred on another venture made by *The Ranger*.⁸⁹ As a result of her diligence, Hassall continued to earn Spanish “coined silver” despite the risks inherent in trans-imperial trading. Her success depended upon an ability to maintain neutral relationships with Spanish trading partners, regardless of whether the peace treaties between Britain and Spain were broken. Profits, rather than patriotic sentiments, motivated female merchants as much as it did their male counterparts.

⁸⁶ Anna Hassall Account Current with John Meyers, 1743, GD 345/1230, NAS.

⁸⁷ Ibid.

⁸⁸ Military conflicts included: the War of Spanish Succession (1702-13), the War of the Quadruple Alliance (1718–20), the Blockade of Porto Bello (1726), the Anglo-Spanish War (1727–29), the War of Jenkins’ Ear (1739-48), the War of Austrian Succession (1740-48), and the Seven Years’ War (1756-63).

⁸⁹ Anna Hassall Account Current with John Meyers, 1745, GD 345/1230, NAS.

Warfare could constrain trade, but it also created financial opportunities for shrewd merchants. Astute investors profited in the frequent wars between European powers in the eighteenth century in part by purchasing shares in privateering ventures. Privateers were mercenary agents authorized by their home government and funded by individuals who provided capital to outfit ships and pay crews in return for a stake in whatever “prizes” the vessels seized. In the 1740s, British “prizes” were usually Spanish or French ships, along with all of the cash, goods, and enslaved people on board. Privateer ships differed little in their objectives or makeup from pirate ships. In fact, the same people who engaged in unofficial piracy often became official privateers legally sanctioned by the Crown to plunder during times of war. Such expeditions, neatly melding public and private interests, illustrate the lack of clarity between legitimate and illegitimate financial activities during the eighteenth century.

Anna Hassall was one woman to profit from wartime ambiguity, for she regularly invested in British privateering adventures that set out to capture other European vessels and cargoes. She did not see any conflict between her mercantile activities and her privateering investments. As a merchant, she exported British goods to Spanish colonies. She also invested in privateering operations that attacked Spanish vessels. In 1745, for instance, she purchased a share in *The Tartar*, which brought back a prize Spanish vessel: *The San José y Las Animas*.⁹⁰ The amount she spent on privateering adventures—from repairing the vessels to paying the crew’s wages—was considerable. She even purchased thirty gallons of rum to quench the thirst of one crew.⁹¹

⁹⁰ “Anna Hassall Account Current with John Meyers,” October 22, 1745, GD 345/1230, NAS.

⁹¹ *Ibid.*

Arthur Hassall died in 1748, only seven years after marrying Anna Shanks. The shortness of their marriage was not unusual in Jamaica, where high mortality rates devastated free and enslaved populations alike. Anna Hassall then joined the ranks of widows at the relatively young age of thirty-three.⁹² Upon her husband's death, she also inherited an estate valued at £21,429, worth over £2.6 million today.⁹³ Her fortune was comprised of the inventory of imported goods, especially textiles, described at the opening of this chapter. It included, as well, thirty-nine enslaved people. The girl who grew up aboard ships that traversed the Atlantic and watched her mother unpack barrels and chests of sugar, linen, silk, combs, and shoes now managed an even larger transatlantic, transnational enterprise of her own.

Shortly after her husband's death, Hassall fulfilled her mother's unrealized desire to return to Britain where Anna Hassall had been born, and which the two visited during her childhood. For the second time in her life Hassall left the island and voyaged across the ocean, but she did not travel alone. Instead, her close friend Elizabeth Callender went with her to London. Hassall and Callender shared much in common. They were both wealthy widows who possessed full legal authority over their family estates. This did not make them exceptional, however; as demonstrated in Chapter Three, it was commonplace for Jamaican husbands to make wives the sole heirs of their estates. As a result, a large number of widows independently administered fortunes and operated family businesses.⁹⁴ Hassall and Callender also both engaged in Atlantic trade. Callender continued to manage her sugar plantation in the colony from her London home, where she also handled the

⁹² Trevor Burnard calculated that the average marriage in the Parish of St. Andrew lasted a mean length of eight years. "A Failed Settler Society," 67.

⁹³ Figure generated on "Measuring Worth."

⁹⁴ Approximately half of the men who made bequests to spouses between 1670 and 1760 left their entire estates to wives. *Jamaica Wills, 1661-1770*, vols. 1-38, IRO.

crops' distributions. When she received eleven hogsheads of sugar in 1751, for instance, Callender diligently calculated the customs duties—along with the fees for landing and wharfing the vessel that carried her goods to Britain—and paid to have the sugar weighed and stored in warehouses while awaiting sale.⁹⁵

Friends like Hassall and Callender acted as business partners and surrogate spouses. Both Sarah Shanks and her daughter, Anna Hassall, chose to remain widows rather than remarry. They may have done so for financial reasons, as remarriage would have placed their business operations under the authority of new husbands.⁹⁶ Instead, they preferred female friendships, which afforded women financial and emotional support unencumbered by the threat of masculine power. These relationships could offset women's dependence upon marriage or natal families for sustenance.

Though Hassall chose Callender as her new partner in personal and commercial affairs, she did not shy away from men as new situations arose. In London, Hassall paid a call on Thomas Savill when he was two months late in paying her £179. Savill had earlier assured Hassall that the money was due to arrive any day from Jamaica but the information did not placate her. She went to his house to demand that he pay her immediately. Savill's wife tried to stop Hassall at the front door on the pretense that her husband was sick and bedridden. Hearing the fracas below, Savill sent word downstairs that if either of his ships were lost at sea he would pay her with the insurance money that he received.⁹⁷ Not only were women like Hassall possessed of enough capital to be creditors to men like Savill—who in turn, found nothing extraordinary about borrowing

⁹⁵ Elizabeth Callender frequently recorded the shipments of sugar that she received from Jamaica in her account books. Edward Wilson to Elizabeth Callender, December 1, 1749, NAS.

⁹⁶ Upon remarriage, widows returned to the restrictive laws of coverture.

⁹⁷ Anna Hassall, Book of Receipts from Purchases in London, unsigned "Memorandum" in back of book, January 9, 1749, GD 1/32/34, NAS.

money from them—but men like Savill were also quick to learn that they could not manipulate and defer payments to female merchants.

Callender was similarly confident in her commercial relationships with men. After moving to London, she hired an attorney, Edward Wilson, to act as the manager of her plantation in Jamaica. She could be manipulative. When reporting the news of a flood on the island, Wilson once wrote to Callender: “You’ll perhaps say as you are not in trade what have you to do wth. these calamitys.” But he knew better than to believe in any feminine weakness on Callender’s part.⁹⁸ Their correspondence echoed Shanks’s repartee with Elletson, in which each writer first acknowledged customary beliefs about gendered behavior before turning to and dispatching more practical business matters. Wilson knew that Callender was deeply invested in the “trade” of sugar, and that “calamitys” in Jamaica that decreased her profits would most certainly concern her. Wilson also assumed he and his client shared a detailed knowledge of the sugar trade, and that she knew full well what bad weather could wreak havoc. She was also intimately acquainted with matters of money. Anglo-Jamaicans preferred to pay for goods with a future sugar crop. “As you know” Wilson wrote to her, “sugars are ultimately a Legall Tender...and you know what a chance a man stands to take sugars valued by two fisherman who never sees any but what they buy to make chocolate with, I thought it best to take them at market price.” In his witty allusion to the “fisherman,” Wilson acknowledged Callender’s expertise.⁹⁹ Though Wilson referred to “a man,” it was Callender who assumed the masculine subject position.

⁹⁸ Edward Wilson to Elizabeth Callender, July 12, 1749, and John Hall to Elizabeth Callender, Undated, GD 345/1230, NAS.

⁹⁹ Edward Wilson to Elizabeth Callender, April 30, 1751, in *ibid.*

Moving from colony to metropole obviously did not curtail female participation in overseas trade. On the contrary, Hassall and Callender took advantage of capitalizing on and growing their colonial fortunes in London. They developed investment strategies and became active participants in Britain's emerging stock market. Callender purchased £1,200 in South Sea Company stock, while Hassall also invested £1,400 in the company.¹⁰⁰ Each also bought shares in the East India Company and annuities in the Bank of England.¹⁰¹ By re-investing the proceeds earned via connections to Jamaica in the stock market, and thereby growing their wealth, women like Hassall and Callender increased their fortunes while obscuring their ties to sugar and slavery. They chose to funnel their money into the South Sea Company, for it held a contract to supply slaves to Spanish colonies.¹⁰² The company used Jamaica as a base, and slave ships docked in Kingston before travelling on to Spanish territories. In the middle of the eighteenth century, the East India Company—that would later employ military force to control India—was the chief purveyor of India cottons to the British colonies. Market speculation in both further enmeshed them in the overlapping webs of slavery and colonialism.

Conclusion

The business activities of Sarah Shanks, her daughter Anna Hassall, and Elizabeth Callender demonstrate that women also operated in the realm of mercantile trade, which has commonly been understood as a masculine arena. Their commercial activities suggest

¹⁰⁰ "Mrs. Callenders New Journal London in Great Brittain," June 20, 1751, GD345/1214, NAS; £1,400 "New South-Sea annuities at ten per cent, received of Mrs. Anna Hassall," Miscellaneous Receipts, September 14, 1750, GD 345/1220, NAS.

¹⁰¹ Hassall purchased £1,000 in Bank annuities, earning a generous nine percent return on the Royal Exchange. Callender's annuity in the Bank was worth £2,000.

¹⁰² Hancock, *Citizens of the World*, 26.

that women acted as vigorous participants in the high-risk marketplace that was being made global by Britain's imperial activities. Female merchants thickened the economic connections between Britain and its American colonies, and helped to make Jamaica an important commercial hub. Financial pragmatism, rather than nationalistic sentiments, drove women to pursue transnational trading opportunities, while they also profited from the frequent military conflicts between European powers. Likewise, women's strategic investments of colonial capital in British joint-stock companies and banks aided the monetization of the financial market in the eighteenth century, further extending the profitability of plantation agriculture and the life of plantation slavery.

In the colonial context, longstanding customs that aimed to constrain female authority and preserve male privilege failed to take root. Instead, free peoples' material interests led to the adoption of a more pragmatic approach towards gender. Women continued to administer their Jamaican affairs from afar in Britain. Their business activities were not specific to the island, but rather the result of the conditions born out of a volatile, developing Anglo-Atlantic marketplace. Women seized upon prospects that were often deeply exploitative and dependent upon slave labor. During the first half of the eighteenth century, women treated enslaved people as economic assets and calculated their worth strictly in terms of their labor value. The misery, degradation, and brutality of slavery rarely evinced specifically "feminine" sympathies from women, who were moved by the same entrepreneurial, capitalistic, and monetary drive as men. Together, people residing in both colony and metropole exhibited a nakedly profit-oriented mentality, while also partaking in the practices of polite and, later, sentimental culture. In an

expanding empire, the relentless pursuit of wealth and cultivation of “taste” were complementary—rather than contradictory—impulses.¹⁰³

¹⁰³ For more on the eighteenth-century relationship between slavery and practices of politeness and gentility, see Simon Gikandi, *Slavery and the Culture of Taste* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2011).

CHAPTER SIX

To Be My Own Mistress: Women, Plantation Management, and Slavery

When her husband died in 1727, Mary Elbridge took over the management of Spring Plantation—a colonial enterprise that Mary and other members of the Elbridge family held shares in. She invested a considerable portion of her inheritance in the plantation, erecting new buildings, constructing a new rum distillery, and purchasing more slaves and stock. Spring entered a period of prosperity under her administration. Slavery was central to Mary's life. She managed 123 slaves on the estate and regularly participated in the African slave trade. So, for example, John Elbridge—Mary's brother-in-law who lived in Britain—advised her in 1730 that she could “have negroes at reasonable rates, there being many ships-going to the coast—that you may purchase what you want.” John assumed that Mary knew what the “reasonable rates” for slaves were and where to purchase them.

Mary Elbridge's role as plantation manager and overseer of more than a hundred slaves contradicts our notion of who wielded authority in slaveholding colonies. The growth of the plantation system that defined colonies like Virginia, Barbados, and South Carolina is traditionally attributed to white men. Much attention has been paid to planters

like William Byrd II, Landon Carter, William Beckford, Simon Taylor, and Thomas Jefferson, to name a few. Similarly, slaveholding societies are often characterized or depicted as masculine spaces: sites where white men exercised patriarchal or paternalistic authority over white women, children, and slaves.¹ The scholarly preoccupation with masculinity and male authority in early America, however, fails to account for women's involvement in plantation slavery.²

This chapter examines the correspondence of Mary Elbridge, Rebecca Woolnough, and Anna Elletson, and uses their experience to demonstrate how women directly managed every aspect of plantation business, which ranged from agriculture and export of colonial produce to the control of enslaved labor. Few letters written by women in eighteenth-century Jamaica have survived the ravages of time, weather, pest, or disinterest: these three women's collections are an exception, and an invaluable one. Letters written by women add depth and texture to our understanding of women's roles as plantation managers. They pull together all of the pieces whose contours have been only roughly ascertained from other sources and give us singular, coherent portraits. Elbridge, Woolnough, and Elletson were wealthy widows who each oversaw hundreds of slaves and managed large sugar plantations. In this sense, they do not represent "ordinary" colonial women. They were members of an emerging class of West Indians who built considerable plantations and fortunes out of tropical jungles, and their efforts show women to be as fully entrepreneurial as their male counterparts. Yet, their responsibility

¹ See Burnard, *Mastery, Tyranny, and Desire*, 84; *ibid*, "Evaluating Gender," 81, 85, 90; Morgan, *Slave Counterpoint*, 273-296; Olwell, *Masters, Slaves and Subjects*, 191-200; Parent, Jr., *Foul Means*, 197-209; Brown, *Good Wives*, 322-366.

² Toby Ditz makes this point. See: "The New Men's History and the Peculiar Absence of Gendered Power: Some Remedies from Early American Gender History," *Gender and History* 16, no. 1 (2004): 1-35.

for the lives of numerous slaves also sheds light on how plantation management inevitably involved the exercise of power regardless of gender.

These three women managed their respective plantations between 1730 and 1775, when Jamaica experienced phenomenal economic growth and became Britain's most valuable colony. Britain signed a peace treaty with the Maroons in 1739, ending decades of guerilla warfare and making more rural areas safe for settlement. At the same time, demand for Caribbean sugar rose, thereby increasing its price in the market. During this period, the number of sugar estates in Jamaica grew by 45 percent and the large integrated sugar plantation reached its ascendancy on the island.³ The annual rate of profit on sugar estates ranged between 10 and 13 percent, at the high end of the Atlantic sugar planting profit rate ladder. Not surprisingly, the net worth per free white person in Jamaica was nine times that of any colonial individual in mainland America. The plantation became an extraordinary mechanism for generating wealth and prosperity. All elements of production were combined in one place on one plot worked by an enslaved labor force.⁴ Between 1730 and 1775, the slave population also doubled from 100,000 to 197,000, providing the labor that fueled Jamaica's meteoric rise.⁵ Despite this population increase, slave mortality rates remained high, and the island never acquired a self-reproducing enslaved population in the eighteenth century. Women played an active role in establishing and promoting the agricultural landscape that produced much of the colony's wealth, from subsisting off smallholdings to managing large sugar plantations.

³ Greene, *Pursuits of Happiness*, 160.

⁴ Burnard, *Planters, Merchants, and Slaves*, 24.

⁵ J. R. Ward, "The Profitability of Sugar Planting in the British West Indies, 1650-1834," *The Economic History Review* 31, no. 2 (1978): 207-209; For a detailed overview of how to calculate the profitability of a sugar plantation see: Hancock, *Citizens of the World*, Appendix IV, 411-18.

The visibility of women among planters calls into question the assumption that the “typical” planter was a white man. Their contribution challenges longstanding ideas about who wielded authority and managed production and labor in plantation colonies. The responsibilities that women planters assumed and the power that they wielded over enslaved people far exceeded contemporary notions of the domestic sphere's typical bounds or the tasks associated with “women’s work.”⁶ The plantations that many women ran often resembled agricultural factories. Mistresses invested in expensive, industrial-scale equipment in order to grow finicky crops in a climate plagued by drought, hurricane, pestilence, and revolt. Using mercantile savvy and business connections, they sold perishable goods overseas in often volatile or uncertain markets. Ultimately, the success of a woman’s plantation depended upon her ability to balance the complexity of growing and selling sugar with the demand of managing slave laborers—often hundreds of them—who had few motivations aside from starvation and fear to perform backbreaking work six days a week.

Women and Agriculture

Traditionally, scholars have presented plantations in Antebellum North America as places where the division of labor occurred along gendered lines. It has been assumed that the plantation mistress was responsible for house slaves, while the master or male

⁶ The assumption that slaveholding societies were patriarchal or paternalistic has obscured women’s roles as plantation managers in early America. Scholars who study enslaved people who worked in the household bring free women into view as managers of domestic workers; not field slaves. See, for instance, Beckles, *Natural Rebels*, 56-69; Glymph, *Out of the House of Bondage*, 51-53. See also Laurel Ulrich’s concept of the “deputy husband.” *Good Wives: Image and Reality in the Lives of Women in Northern New England, 1650-1750* (New York: Knopf, 1982), 35-50.

overseer commanded field slaves.⁷ Labor was not distributed so neatly between the sexes a century earlier in another part of Anglophone America: Jamaica. Colonists could ill-afford to impose gendered divisions of labor or to limit activities to neatly defined professional categories. Indeed, eleven percent of the sixty white women who were listed as “proprietors” of Spanish Town in 1754 self-identified as “planter.”⁸ On the island, urban and rural markets were intertwined, rather than discrete. Women who held an interest in plantations also acted as merchants. Wealthier women planters either owned or rented homes in Spanish Town or Kingston, where they could transact mercantile business, socialize, and enjoy urban entertainment. Despite these pursuits, they also spent time on plantations overseeing agricultural affairs.

Women’s agricultural activities reflect the diversity of the island’s farming economy. While sugar, rum, and molasses made up three-fourths of the colony’s exports, Jamaica never became a sugar monoculture like Barbados or the Leeward Islands.⁹ It was agriculturally diverse. More than half of the plantations raised livestock, grew provisions, or cultivated minor staples. Only 52 percent of slaves worked with sugar, as compared to over 75 percent working in the old sugar colonies of Barbados and the Leeward Islands. Many slaves were employed to produce coffee, tend livestock, or work in Jamaica’s towns.¹⁰

⁷ Glymph, *Out of the House of Bondage*; Deborah Gray White, *Ar'n't I a Woman: Female Slaves in the Plantation South* (New York: W. W. Norton, 1999); Elizabeth Fox-Genovese, *Within the Plantation Household: Black and White Women of the Old South* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1988); Catherine Clinton, *The Plantation Mistress: Woman's World in the Old South* (New York: Pantheon, 1984).

⁸ Thirteen women who were listed as proprietors identified themselves as “planters” under “occupation.” This census only listed female planters who lived in one town; the numbers were larger for the entire colony. Spanish Town Census, 1754, SAS/RF 20/7, ESRO.

⁹ Greene, *Pursuits of Happiness*, 160.

¹⁰ Burnard, *Planters, Merchants, and Slaves*, 18.

Thus, the varied nature of Jamaican economic life provided ample opportunity for free women of European and African descent from all levels of the society to survive by farming. Some owned small farms and a few slaves. Mary Gourlaw, for example, raised cattle and horses with the help of one enslaved woman, while Hannah Barnfather supported herself with six breeding mares and the labor of one slave.¹¹ As these examples suggest, women involved in planting often specialized in raising livestock. The widow Christian Price bought a pen and its cattle, which she bequeathed to her daughters.¹² The widow Elizabeth Bouffar oversaw in 1750 a livestock pen along with a 140-acre plantation in the mountains.¹³ In his 1770 will, George Richards provided his wife with a piece of property called Fertile Ground that he identified as “*her* cattle pen.”¹⁴ Raising and selling livestock could be quite lucrative. Every plantation relied upon cattle and mules to till the fields, while horses provided essential transportation around both estate and island. Mary Johnstone Rose, a free woman of color living in Spanish Town, raised sheep, mules, and goats on her livestock farm in St. Catherine Parish during the 1750s. It provided her with a constant and considerable stream of income: sheep alone brought in £143 per annum from mutton sales in the 1750s, while mules earned £85 for their sale in the same period.¹⁵ Rose earned roughly £714 a year from the sale of livestock (approximately £85,000 today).¹⁶

When we shift our attention to female planters, colonial Jamaica bears a striking resemblance to the Chesapeake or the Carolinas. They are emblematic of a new social

¹¹ Will of John Gourlaw, 1710, vol. 13, IRO; Will of Edward Barnfather, 1750, vol. 27, IRO.

¹² Will of Christian Price, 1720, vol. 15, IRO.

¹³ Will of Solomon Bouffar, 1750, vol. 27, IRO.

¹⁴ Will of George Richards, 1770, vol. 38, IRO.

¹⁵ Richard Alpress to Rose Fuller, May 26 1759, Jamaica Papers of Rose Fuller, 1729-1763, SAS/RF, ESRO.

¹⁶ Figure calculated using the “Measuring Worth.”

order that was emerging in slaveholding colonies throughout the Atlantic basin. In South Carolina, for example, Eliza Pinckney assumed responsibility for overseeing the family plantation at age sixteen. The Pinckneys had immigrated to South Carolina from the West Indies. When Eliza's father left on business, he placed his daughter in charge. "I have the business of three plantations to transact, which requires much writing and more business and fatigue of other sorts than you can imagine," the adolescent Eliza wrote to a friend. Eliza's capability indicates that her father had involved her in plantation business at a young age, and expected his daughter to play an authoritative role. Eliza, in turn, believed it was her duty as a daughter to engage in family business. She wrote: "Least you should imagine it too burthensom to a girl at my early time of life, give me leave to answer you. I think myself happy that I can be useful to so good a father."¹⁷ Eliza's experience served her well later in life. When her husband died, she shouldered responsibility for all his rural and urban property including a thousand-acre plantation called Auckland, another five-hundred-acre estate called Pinckney Plains, five hundred acres on the Savannah River, five hundred acres at "Four Holes," and property in Charleston.¹⁸

This pattern was not confined to the Anglo-Atlantic community. Women also took on authoritative roles on plantations in the French colony of Saint Domingue, which outstripped Jamaica as the primary producer of sugar and coffee during the second half of the eighteenth century. The life of Marie Tousard offers further evidence of women acting as plantation managers regardless of marital status or age. Marie and her husband Louis Tousard were coffee planters in eighteenth-century Saint Domingue. Louis was in

¹⁷ Eliza Pinckney, *Letterbook of Eliza Lucas Pinckney, 1739-1762: Intriguing Letters by One of Colonial America's Most Accomplished Women* (Columbia: University of South Carolina Press, reprint edition 1997) 7.

¹⁸ *Letterbook of Eliza Lucas Pinckney*, xxiii.

the military and Marie ran their plantation during his extended absences. She equated herself with workers that surrounded her: “I am like the working men. I only take walks on Sunday, and even then I have to hurry. The rest of the week my little family and my housekeeping take up all my time.”¹⁹ Marie did not hesitate to equate herself with a “working” man. From her perspective, the tasks she performed were identical to those of a male planter. Her description of her work as “housekeeping” is deceptive. She oversaw the planting, harvesting, and sale of coffee and managed the slaves on the plantation.

The lives of Eliza Pinckney and Maria Tousard suggest how many factors led to women’s involvement in agriculture. In more recently settled slaveholding colonies like Jamaica, South Carolina, and Saint Domingue, the fragility of life and the need to control enslaved laborers encouraged the participation of all close free relatives, regardless of gender. Planting, in particular, required years of build-up before profits were reaped. Driven by the demands of merchants and investors for repayment of debts, and unsure of what crops would be successful, planters relied on family involvement. If a man died before making and paying for investments on infrastructure and labor, which he paid for on credit, he exposed his family to both risk and debt. It often made more sense to transfer ownership of a plantation to female kin rather than selling it, as Jamaican wills suggest. Husbands assumed their wives were capable of managing their plantations on their own, with the expert advice of attorneys and overseers. Indeed, it was commonly expected that widows would run agricultural ventures for the remainder of their lives.

So it is hardly surprising to find that, in the 1720s, men like the planter Francis Rose dependend on his wife Elizabeth and their son Thomas to administer the family’s sugar plantation “at their joint charge and expense.” For her labors, Elizabeth would earn

¹⁹ Marie Tousard to Louis Tousard, May 3, 1789, Louis de Tousard Papers, Volume 4.23, WCL.

half of the “rents profits and produce” from all of the Rose estates, in addition to inheriting a house in Spanish Town staffed with ten slaves and a cattle pen manned by sixteen slaves.²⁰ In effect, she would assume responsibility, not only for managing the household, but also the slaves, the crops, the livestock, and the finances after her husband’s death. Similarly, the planter Thomas Spong gave his wife Cicelia half of a partnership in Windsor Plantation, plus £71.²¹ Another planter, John Stretch, directed his wife to supervise the family’s “whole estate,” for which effort she would receive all plantation profits.²² Additionally, in recompense for managing the plantation, the planter John Campbell left his widow a handsome annuity of £407, a furnished house, eighteen slaves, and a coach and eight horses.²³ By offering wives and female relatives a significant share of profit, men recognized women’s skills and sought to enroll them in the maintenance of their ventures.

Mary Elbridge and the Rise of the Sugar Plantation

Mary Elbridge managed Spring Plantation, a medium-sized sugar plantation during the first half of the eighteenth century, when sugar planting was rapidly expanding on the island. No records of her birth or natal family exist. As she grew up, Jamaica was undergoing a dramatic alteration. When Mary was a child, a rough parity existed between free and enslaved people. In 1739, a few years before she died, slaves outnumbered free people by nearly ten to one. She lived in a society that was heavily influenced by African cultural traditions at a time when planters, in particular, were gaining unprecedented

²⁰ Will of Francis Rose, 1721, vol. 15, IRO.

²¹ Will of Thomas Spong, 1746, ‘Abstracts of Jamaica Wills, 1625–1792,’ Add. Mss., 34,181, BL.

²² Will of John Stretch, 1699, vol. 9, IRO.

²³ Will of John Campbell, 1740, vol. 22, IRO.

affluence from the rapid growth of slavery. Mary's marriage to Robert Elbridge, a local Kingston merchant—and one of the brothers who held a stake in Spring Plantation—connected her to a trans-Atlantic family.

Already established merchants in seventeenth-century Bristol, the Elbridges pursued the new entrepreneurial opportunities created by Britain's expanding presence in America. They cast a wide net overseas, purchasing land near Bristol, Maine to participate in lucrative cod fishing. Thomas Elbridge left old Bristol for new Bristol and struggled to survive. In 1678, the destitute Elbridges moved to Marblehead, Massachusetts, where daughter Elizabeth received permission to sell "liquor, beer and syder" to support her four younger siblings. Thomas and his wife Rebecca, it seems, had left their children in New England in pursuit of new opportunity in Jamaica, where his brother Aldworth Elbridge had purchased land to start a plantation. Thomas died at Spring Plantation at Liguanea in St. Andrew Parish next to Kingston in 1682. Rebecca followed him to the grave a few years later.²⁴

The plight of the Elbridges typifies how an expanding empire fragmented families, drawing them overseas to uncertain fortunes, and each move the Elbridge family made in America required women to assume authoritative roles: the daughter Elizabeth became surrogate mother and breadwinner for the Elbridge children in Marblehead, while the mother Rebecca traveled with her husband to the newly-settled island of Jamaica. Women on both sides of the Atlantic would continue to play crucial roles in the Elbridge family business for much of the eighteenth century. Aldworth Elbridge divided his third

²⁴ Charles Jenney, "The Fortunate Island of Monhegan," October 19, 1921, *Proceedings of the American Antiquarian Society*, 324-328.

share of Spring Plantation equally between his two daughters, Mary and Rebecca, when he died in 1703, ensuring female oversight of the estate for at least some period of time.²⁵

The plantation they inherited reflects an earlier phase of island sugar agriculture. At the turn of the eighteenth century, slaves already comprised the large majority of the migrant planter's wealth. Enslaved men, women, and children valued at £1,254 made up roughly seventy-five percent of the total value of the estate, which in its entirety was inventoried at £1,630.²⁶ Nearly all of Spring's capital was invested in slaves. In contrast, the family furnishings appear to have been shabby and in a state of disrepair. Aldworth left his daughters a cane couch and chairs, a broken elbow chair, an "old bed," four guns (three "unfit for use), seventeen "small pictures," and a "large" map. One can only wonder what illustrations decorated their home, and whether the map traced Aldworth's voyage from Bristol to Jamaica, or if it was a survey of the island.

²⁵ As Chapter Three demonstrates, it was common for fathers to provide daughters with generous bequests. Aldworth Elbridge died in October 1703. Woolnough Papers, Ashton Court Archives, 16/25a, BRO.

²⁶ Inventory of Aldworth Elbridge, 1712, vol. 9, ff. 127, JA.



Figure 6.1. Location of Spring Plantation at Liguanea in St. Andrew Parish. Thomas Craskell, “Map of the County Surrey, Jamaica” (1763, Library of Congress).

The girls, Mary and Rebecca, were sent back to relatives in Bristol, England for schooling after their father’s death. Colonists did not establish schools and colleges on the island, preferring to send children to England to be educated.²⁷ While scholars have observed that colonial parents regularly sent boys overseas, it was equally commonplace for girls of middling status like Mary and Rebecca to be educated in England. Knowing

²⁷ Gauci, *William Beckford*, 23.

this, it is unsurprising that women who oversaw colonial plantations displayed a high level of learning. Rebecca Elbridge, the younger of the two, however, was not a model student. Her uncle, Kingston merchant Robert Elbridge, apologized to his relatives in Bristol about her performance at school: “I am sorry, she is soe backward in learning.” His apology highlights the familial interest in her education and their high academic expectation for her. Early in the eighteenth century, Robert was already attributing the island’s permissive environment to a culture where children were raised to “do just what they please.”²⁸ The concerned uncle fretted his niece would end up a spinster and so urged his relatives to “gett her a good husband” in England.²⁹ Gender difference also mattered. Marriage was the only alternative for a poor female student like Rebecca. But, doing “just what they please” would have a very different meaning for the Elbridge women than the connotation Robert implied. Rather than squandering family fortunes and leading dissipated lives, the most adept family members—male or female—were expected to shrewdly manage the plantation.

This is exactly what occurred when the uncle and guardian Robert died in 1726. Spring Plantation again fell into female hands, for his wife Mary inherited his third of the estate during her life.³⁰ He also gave her nine slaves and a house in Kingston. Robert did not make Mary a wealthy woman when he died. Nevertheless, he adhered to the pattern of giving her the largest portion of assets in slaves. Widowhood was a familiar life phase for Mary. She, like many free women, married more than once and also spent a

²⁸ Robert Elbridge to John Elbridge, March 19, 1719, Woolnough Papers, Ashton Court Archives, 16/6a-c, BRO.

²⁹ Ibid., March 3, 1723.

³⁰ Robert Elbridge died in 1726. Woolnough Papers, Ashton Court Archives, 16/25a, BRO. Draft, Power of Attorney: John Elbridge, Thomas Elbridge, Henry Lloyd and Mary, wife, and Rebecca Elbridge, January 1727, Woolnough Papers, Ashton Court Archives, 16/9, BRO.

considerable part of her adult life as a widow. Robert was not her first husband. Mary had a daughter from a previous marriage who he described in his will as a “poore spinster,” giving her a gold watch and erasing any debts that she owed to him for “lodging and washing,” which indicates that Elizabeth lived with the couple.

After Robert’s death, Mary continued to support her daughter while simultaneously assuming full responsibility for managing Spring Plantation. As Robert’s widow, she was the nearest relative through marriage to the Elbridge family who lived in Jamaica. All agreed that she was most suited to oversee their colonial interest. The decision was wise. The plantation entered a period of prosperity under Mary’s administration. During her tenure as its manager until her death in 1744, she erected new buildings, purchased more slaves and stock, and *in toto* invested at least £1,395 (the equivalent of £200,000 today) of her own money in the operation. Years earlier, her husband had described Spring Plantation as worn out soil-wise, worked by elderly slaves, and located in a colony that was “quite spoyld.” At the time, he had urged his brother John to travel to Jamaica to “see yr interest.”³¹ John Elbridge never bothered, relying instead on his brother’s widow to turn a profit: “you’ll live on the plantation,” he informed her, “and manage it better to advantage than it has been done since my brother Aldworth’s death.”³² Mary’s gender never entered into her brother-in-law John’s estimation of her ability to oversee the enterprise. Instead, he believed in her skill and allowed her to make all the important decisions. He readily concurred with her plan to invest in a new curing house and still house for sugar processing, “not questioning” her

³¹ Robert Elbridge to John Elbridge, March 19, 1719, Woolnough Papers, Ashton Court Archives, 16/6a-c3, BRO.

³² John Elbridge to Mary Elbridge, July 19, 1727, Woolnough Papers, Ashton Court Archives, 16/8a, BRO.

“prudent & frugal management.”³³ When Mary planted more cane and purchased more mules to assist with the harvest, he again complimented her “prudent management,” which deserved his “hearty and sincere thanks.” He balanced a critique of the sugar she sent to him (it was middling quality) with a compliment (he was “glad to find that the plantation is in a flourishing way under your good management”).³⁴ Again and again, John Elbridge implied that her abilities surpassed those of his deceased brother’s, at one point going so far as to express a wish that his “Brother had prevailed on you to have lived on the Plantation in his time wch. would have been not only for yor health but the interest of the concerned in the Plantation.”³⁵ When Mary Elbridge’s daughter married Samuel Dicker, John Elbridge contrasted Dicker’s business abilities with hers, claiming Mary “would do every thing that is right and honest.”³⁶ John Elbridge had good reason and sense to praise and flatter her. She was the only family member living in the colony who was willing and able to assume responsibility for the plantation. The work required not only a deep knowledge of agriculture, but also a ready command of sugar markets in both Jamaica and Britain. Mary displayed the latter when she chose, at certain times, to sell her sugar and rum on the island where it fetched a higher price rather than shipping it to Bristol where her relatives lived. All benefited from her entrepreneurial acumen; in return, she earned a modest administration fee each year, which was calculated at one percent of her sales of sugar and rum.

Mary’s daily activities as plantation manager were highly varied, from shipping sugar overseas to managing construction projects. During her tenure she built a new still

³³ Ibid.

³⁴ Ibid., October 31, 1730, Woolnough Papers, Ashton Court Archives, 16/8n, BRO.

³⁵ Ibid., December 15, 1729, Woolnough Papers, Ashton Court Archives, 16/8h, BRO.

³⁶ John Elbridge to Samuel Dickers, September 1732, Woolnough Papers, Ashton Court Archives, 16/12 a-c, BRO.

house, sugar mill, and curing house stocked with sugar pots, ordering bricks from England for the project. Enslaved artisans were hired to perform the construction work, including a carpenter and “sawyers” to saw wooden boards. Mary planned to have the artisans train two of her slaves, an “ingenious” man and a boy, in woodworking and carpentry. She also paid coopers to make barrels for shipping the sugar and rum. In addition to improving the sugar production process at Spring, Mary also increased its agricultural output by extending the cane fields into the “mountain land,” purchasing more mules to harvest the additional crops and renting a cattle pen to provide the necessary labor and dung for the crops.³⁷

The plantation was a working business and it was also a home. Mary had the carpenters repair the planter’s dwelling house while she managed Spring, which she furnished with twelve chairs, two tables, a couch, and two window sashes imported from England, along with coarse calico curtains and sheets.³⁸ In addition to her own abode Mary purchased provisions and clothing for all of the staff—white and slaves alike. In 1730 alone she bought pepper, oatmeal, cheese, bacon, fresh meat, onions, and nutmeg to feed the white employees; coarse hats and stockings for the slaves who worked in the dangers boiling house; shoes for two servants; blankets for the overseer and servants; and two suits. Finally, she needed to pay for the remainder of its operating costs, which included the overseer’s salary, local taxes, and lawyer fees.³⁹

Mary fully concurred with her brother-in-law’s assessment of the improvements she made to Spring Plantation. Little in the way of feminine deference or inferiority

³⁷ John Elbridge to Mary Elbridge, December 15, 1729, Woolnough Papers, Ashton Court Archives, 16/8h, BRO

³⁸ Ibid., July 20, 1730, Woolnough Papers, Ashton Court Archives, 16/81, BRO

³⁹ Spring Plantation Account Current w. Gale, Atkins, Woodcock, and Dicker, 1730, Woolnough Papers, Ashton Court Archives, 16/10, BRO.

inflected her writing. She handled business matters with the confidence and assiduity of a male planter. She also firmly believed that her family owed her for her time and energy. Mary estimated her total investment in the business over thirteen years to be £1,396 (£175,000 today). She could “prove by the accounts” that she had “made more money for it and saved more than ever was under any person’s management,” especially “considering that the land was very much worn out [and] the seasons more uncertain,” and she was proud of it.⁴⁰

By 1739, Mary had managed Spring Plantation for over thirteen years and she wanted to relinquish her position, urging her family to sell the business and net her £1,785.⁴¹ Since her husband had bequeathed her only a “life interest” in the plantation, she most likely wanted to secure some money for herself and her daughter, rather than continuing to toil for relatives she barely knew. Elizabeth Lawes—the thirty-three year old widow of James Lawes, who was himself the son of Sir Nicholas Lawes, Lieutenant Governor of Jamaica (1718-1722)—managed the adjacent plantation, Snow Hill, which she inherited from her husband.⁴² She wanted to purchase Spring Plantation in 1739, providing Mary with an exit.⁴³ Mary reasoned that if Lawes owned both properties, Lawes could easily move sugarcane from Spring Plantation to her sugar mill, “which

⁴⁰ Mary Elbridge to Henry Woolnough, June 19, 1739, Woolnough Papers, Ashton Court Archives, 24e, BRO; Mary Elbridge to John Elbridge, January 29, 1739, Woolnough Papers, Ashton Court Archives, 16/22a, BRO.

⁴¹ When she factored in improvements she had made to the property since her husband’s death, as well as the slaves and stock she had purchased, Elbridge valued her interest in the plantation at £2,500. Ibid., January 29, 1739, Woolnough Papers, Ashton Court Archives, 16/22a, BRO.

⁴² For more on Elizabeth Lawes (Gibbon) see: Anne Powers, “The Queen of Hell in Portman Square,” *A Parcel of Ribbons: Eighteenth Century Jamaica Viewed Through Family Stories and Documents*, March 17, 2012, <http://aparcelforribbons.co.uk/tag/sir-nicholas-lawes>

⁴³ “Sugar Plantations in Jamaica, with the quantities of sugar made for some years past,” 1739, Add. 12434, BL.

would render both estates in one owner each the better for the other.”⁴⁴ Mary’s explanation of the proposed sale—“which according to my notion of it is as nigh as can be computed the just valuation to be paid in money according as estates are now valued in Jamaica [sic]”—exposed her knowledge of the local real estate market.⁴⁵ Two independently wealthy planter widows who lived next door to each other devised the scheme. Lawes would pay £3,000 and the remainder of the property would be mortgaged to her. Though men helped them to survey the property and offered legal advice, the women initiated a complex land transaction that would net the Elbridge family the equivalent of one million pounds.⁴⁶ Mary Elbridge strategically painted a bleak portrait of the prospects of Spring Plantation in an effort to entice her family to agree to the sale. She described Spring Plantation as “worn out from constantly planting it for fifty years,” and predicted “dry weather” spelled poor future crops. She also factored into the reduced value of the estate four enslaved men—all coopers and skilled artisans on the estate, but ones who were “worn out.” They, too, had been drained of life through constant usage, and tellingly only entered into Mary’s letter as an expense. It would cost, she averred, £178 to purchase their replacements.

John Elbridge, owner of one of the three plantation shares and Mary’s agent in Britain, died before she gained the family’s approval of the sale. His praise of her hard work turned out to be hollow. Worse, though he was “vastly rich and left long legacies,” he left her nothing. She felt bitterly the slight: “[I] do not hear that he has in the least remembered me who was his brother’s widow and have served him faithfully as a sister

⁴⁴ Mary Elbridge to John Elbridge, January 29, 1739, Woolnough Papers, Ashton Court Archives, 16/22a, BRO.

⁴⁵ Ibid.

⁴⁶ Spring Plantation was valued at £8,000 in 1739. Estimate derived using “Measuring Worth.”

and friend.”⁴⁷ Yet, by that time, a new crisis had arisen. Mary’s niece Rebecca Elbridge had married Bristol merchant Henry Woolnough, who assumed responsibility for his wife’s stake in Spring Plantation. Unlike John, he was a stranger to Mary. To him, she played upon his sympathies by portraying herself as an impoverished, self-sacrificing widow, writing: “I have labourd and fiteagued my self for this twelve years.” She claimed that in the previous two years John had failed to pay her for the sugar she had shipped him, and left her “no mony in my hands.”⁴⁸

John Elbridge’s death, his decision to leave her nothing, the advent of a new partner, and the failure to sell the plantation all reduced Mary to characterizing (and perhaps thinking of) herself as an unappreciated, undercompensated, and aging woman. Commercial confidence, acumen, and financial pragmatism gave way to resentment and desperate pleas for sympathy. “I think it very hard to be made so uneasy in my old days and in the latter part of my life,” she wrote to England, emphasizing the wealth that her relatives in Britain possessed in comparison with her own: “you are both gentlemen of fortune and it is a trifle to you [;] but it is all the support I have and what I have labourd and cared for.”⁴⁹ Mary even referred to the “care and motherly kindness” she had long shown to Woolnough’s wife Rebecca. She completed the self-portrait by underscoring her irreproachable moral character, thanking God she had “always discharged an honest consience and what other people woud have made an advantage of I scruple to doe.”⁵⁰

⁴⁷ Mary Elbridge to Henry Woolnough, May 17, 1739, Woolnough Papers, Ashton Court Archives, d., BRO.

⁴⁸ Ibid.

⁴⁹ Mary Elbridge to Thomas Elbridge and Henry Woolnough, November 22, 1739, Woolnough Papers, Ashton Court Archives, g. BRO.

⁵⁰ Mary Elbridge to Henry Woolnough, June 29, 1739, Woolnough Papers, Ashton Court Archives, e., BRO.

When her partner-relatives in Britain failed to comply with her wish to sell the plantation, Elbridge's anger was palpable. She penned a volley of letters, brimming with fury and invective: "for what reason you doe not comply I cannot imagine I am sure it is neither my principall nor for any advantage I can reap that I give you this advice."⁵¹ Moreover, their delay had caused Elizabeth Lawes to withdraw and the deal to collapse, which led to more "fretting and vexation." Mary felt victimized by her family and used "unhandsomely" by her neighbor. However, Mary was an adept businesswoman. She rapidly recovered and proposed an alternative. Instead of selling Spring Plantation, she proposed to buy it altogether in an effort to protect the investment that she had made in it. If the family declined to sell it to her, she demanded they pay her a higher commission as manager. The Elbridges chose the latter.⁵² Mary's relatives in Britain were profiting from the stream of sugar that flowed to them from Jamaica and were in no hurry to disperse with the source of revenue. Her efforts to cast herself as a downtrodden old woman fell on deaf ears. Indeed, Woolnough executed a power of attorney in 1737, granting Mary legal authority to manage Rebecca's share of the estate.⁵³

Elbridge's daily dealings with the plantation slaves were essential to Spring's success. She began to buy and sell slaves as soon as she assumed control of the business. When her husband Robert died, she planned to sell any slaves that seemed close to death or sickness, so that the family's "interest may not suffer."⁵⁴ Elbridge, not her male relatives, took charge of purchasing new slaves for the plantation. John Elbridge advised

⁵¹ Mary Elbridge to Thomas Elbridge and Henry Woolnough, November 22, 1739, Woolnough Papers, Ashton Court Archives, 24g, BRO.

⁵² Mary Elbridge to Henry Woolnough, July 23, 1740, Woolnough Papers, Ashton Court Archives, BRO.

⁵³ Will of Mary Elbridge, 1744, vol. 25, IRO. Contemporary amount calculated using "Measuring Worth."

⁵⁴ John Elbridge to Mary Elbridge, July 19, 1727, Woolnough Papers, Ashton Court Archives, 16/8a, BRO. For more on this family see: D. K. Jones, "The Elbridge, Woolnough and Smyth families of Bristol in the Eighteenth Century, with Special Reference to the Spring Plantation, Jamaica" (M. Litt. thesis, University of Bristol, 1971).

her in 1730 that she could “have negroes at reasonable rates, there being many ships-going to the coast-that you may purchase what you want.” John assumed that Mary knew what the “reasonable rates” for slaves were and where to purchase them.⁵⁵ Nearly a decade later, Mary was still buying and selling slaves. She was particularly impatient to rid the plantation of certain people who were causing her “much vexation”: “I shall endeavour to dispose of the negros to the best advantage I can,” she wrote to her relatives, “with all the justice as lys in my power.”⁵⁶

When Mary referred to “justice,” she meant her ability to dispose of slaves that were no longer useful so that, as she said, her family’s “interest may not suffer.”⁵⁷ Elbridge was legally empowered to buy and sell slaves for Spring Plantation. She alone held the authority to decide the fates of 123 people, deciding who would be sold and possibly separated from their families. In one instance, for example, Mary shrewdly calculated the relative value of certain slaves, describing one “bety” as “sickly” and another “hanah” as “a very lazy creture,” writing: “hir work will scarce maintain” her.⁵⁸ In her estimation, they needed to be sold. This was Mary’s way of executing economic justice on the plantation, for profits were of utmost importance. She also rented slaves who were skilled laborers, including a “negro carpenter at £30 per annum.” Elbridge was even accused of stealing four slaves from the planter. Apparently, she “took” the woman Venus and the woman Obbah along with her children from the planter at Halfway Tree in Kingston. He pursued Elbridge in court for £214 in damages. Elbridge claimed that she

⁵⁵ John Elbridge to Mary Elbridge, October 30, 1730, Woolnough Papers, Ashton Court Archives, BRO.

⁵⁶ Mary Elbridge to Henry Woolnough, December 14, 1737, Woolnough Papers, Ashton Court Archives, 19a, BRO.

⁵⁷ John Elbridge to Mary Elbridge, July 19, 1727, Woolnough Papers, Ashton Court Archives, 16/8a, BRO.

⁵⁸ Mary Elbridge to Rebecca Elbridge, July 29, 1737, Woolnough Papers, Ashton Court Archives, BRO.

was not guilty and put herself “on the country,” asking to be tried by a jury. They found her guilty.⁵⁹

Her attitude towards enslaved people was equally as complex. On one hand, she adopted a utilitarian view of them as animals or machines that were only valuable for the labor that they provided. Those who were “worn out” and could no longer work were “not valued at anything.” The elderly slaves, who were “so old and past labor,” were a useless drain on the plantation’s finances: “The taxes and cloaths and other things for them when often sick,” Elbridge explained, “is more than any manner of service they can do for it.” With ruthless pragmatism, she urged her relatives to sell the plantation before “any of the negroes dye or cattle,” which would reduce its value.⁶⁰

Not all of the slaves on Spring Plantation readily accepted their positions of servitude. Anyone caught stealing food, running away, or being “lazy” could be subjected to draconian punishments. Mary’s power was most brutally manifested in her ability to physically coerce and abuse slaves. Though she never discussed coercive measures in her letters, her estate account book contains entries for payments made for catching runaways and imprisoning others.⁶¹ Elbridge, like all slave owners, had built a society in which they were so vastly outnumbered by slaves—and had so tenuous a grip on things—that constant vigilance and extreme measures were required. Mary employed an island-born man named Humphrey Seaward to oversee the plantation, and it is unclear if he or Mary determined how to discipline slaves.⁶² Any planter, male or female, outsourced the daily

⁵⁹ James Edwards v. Mary Elbridge, Grand Court Records, 1743, vol. 41, JA.

⁶⁰ Mary Elbridge to John Elbridge, January 29, 1739, Woolnough Papers, Ashton Court Archives, 16/22b, BRO.

⁶¹ Payment made to catch a “run away negro.” Spring Plantation account current with Gale, Atkins Woodcock & Dicker. 1730, Woolnough Papers, Ashton Court Archives, 16/10, BRO.

⁶² Burnard, *Planters, Merchants, and Slaves*, 42.

operation of a plantation to an overseer—normally a white man—if they could afford to do so. From the perspective of an enslaved person, it mattered little whether Mary or a hired hand meted out punishments: the physical and psychological tolls were no less severe.

Mary's repeated references to the difficulties of slave management suggest a more intimate involvement with enslaved people on Spring. The unceasing need to coerce people to work seems to have had a deleterious effect on Elbridge. In 1739, after managing Spring Plantation for over a decade, she urged her relatives to sell the estate so that "I may have no more to doe with the plantation."⁶³ She identified dealing with slaves as the main—and, indeed, only—reason for wanting to retire. In one letter she asked her brother-in-law to "consider how hard I have laboured" for the plantation and "what I have gone through in my Body & Mind and the troubles wth. these negroes."⁶⁴ She repeatedly identified working with slaves as difficult and taxing, admitting she was "tired with the fatigue of negroes."⁶⁵ No longer compelling slaves to work would bring her peace, she plaintively noted; "all that I have any vew of is a little quiet and ease from the troble and vexation of negros."⁶⁶ The "troubles" Elbridge experienced with slaves took a great physical and psychological toll on her. Indeed, she came to see herself as a slave to the plantation "which I have laboured and fiteagued my self for."⁶⁷ Elbridge's effort to get rid of the plantation failed. Years later, near the end of her life, Elbridge continued to

⁶³ Mary Elbridge to Henry Woolnough, June 29, 1739, Woolnough Papers, Ashton Court Archives, 24e, BRO.

⁶⁴ Mary Elbridge to John Elbridge, January 29, 1739, Woolnough Papers, Ashton Court Archives, 16/22b, BRO.

⁶⁵ Ibid.

⁶⁶ Mary Elbridge to Thomas Elbridge and Henry Woolnough, November 22, 1739, Woolnough Papers, Ashton Court Archives, 24g, BRO.

⁶⁷ Mary Elbridge to Henry Woolnough, June 29, 1739, Woolnough Papers, Ashton Court Archives, 24e, BRO.

compare herself to the people who labored in servitude for her. “Realy I have bin a tru Slave to the plantation and ought to have any advantage.” She died one year later.⁶⁸

Why, then, did Mary Elbridge—a wealthy, independent, and relatively powerful woman—perceive of herself as a slave? From Mary’s perspective, the work that she performed was exhausting and thankless, and her family refused to let her relinquish her role: they were content to let a distant relative send them a steady stream of sugar revenue. Slavery was therefore an essential aspect of Mary’s life. She was born on the island and grew up with plantation slavery. It was only natural for Mary to compare herself with a slave when describing her role as a laborer within her own family. Mary’s position of authority became, at the end of her life, an unbearable burden.

As a plantation manager, Mary needed to compel a large number of unfree people to perform hard labor. Her acts of violence reflect a social world where free people were vastly outnumbered by slaves but stood to earn riches if they were able to compel their laborers effectively. Furthermore, Mary managed Spring Plantation during the long simmering Maroon War: a successful military operation conducted by free descendants of slaves against the British Army that subsequently led to the negotiation of a peace treaty in 1739. Slave revolts were a real, perpetual threat during her life. Mary was brutal, calculating, and authoritarian because her control of slaves was tenuous and fragile. In this environment, women could not afford to be seen as weak and subordinate: the cultural meanings associated with femininity were impractical, if not detrimental.

Slave ownership affected both free and enslaved. Elbridge’s attempts to define slaves as livestock or financial assets were continually undermined by the actions of people who resisted such definitions. This contradiction warped the social relations

⁶⁸ Ibid., February 18, 1743, Woolnough Papers, Ashton Court Archives, 16/22b, BRO.

between free and enslaved, and made slave ownership an unbearable burden to some. Elbridge, like most slave owners in early eighteenth-century Jamaica, needed to constantly mitigate between different modes of perceiving slaves. While some slaves were “worn out” or caused her “trouble,” others were “ingenious” and deserving of freedom. Elbridge wanted to appoint an “an ingenious Negro Man and a Boy” to “learn the carpenter’s trade, to help in building the curing house and repairing the dwelling house.” She also sought to retain possession of a mulatto woman named Mary and her child Mimba if her relatives sold Spring Plantation. Clearly, Elbridge had formed personal ties to Mimba, most likely her house servant. Unlike the other slaves, who she bought and sold without compunction, Elbridge singled Mimba out as special.⁶⁹

Elbridge’s will of 1745 is even more revealing of the emotional ties that bound Elbridge to some of her slaves. She left instructions for several slaves to be manumitted upon her death and detailed the legacies they were to receive thereafter. Elbridge, like other women who freed slaves, focused her attention on children, in this case one she described as “my negro boy named Hardy.” Like other freed children, Hardy was treated like an orphan to be placed under the care of a free woman, who would then act the part of surrogate mother after Elbridge died. Elbridge instructed the caretaker to put Hardy out “to learn such trade as she shall think proper”; the estate would pay for his training. Once Hardy turned twenty-one, he would be freed.⁷⁰

Elbridge also manumitted two women, Phillis and Peggy. Peggy must have been a favorite of Elbridge’s, for she left the woman £3.5, a copper kettle, some iron pots, and “such part of my wearing apparel as my friend shall refuse to have.” She was likely the

⁶⁹ Watson Swymmer & Co. to Rebecca Woolnough, May 9 1756, Woolnough Papers, Ashton Court Archives, 27/19a, BRO.

⁷⁰ Will of Mary Elbridge, 1745, vol. 25, IRO.

“Peggy” that Elbridge had inherited from her husband years earlier. Peggy would also have the use of Elbridge’s slave boy Scotland, of far greater value than any clothing, and retain possession of the house where she lived in Kingston. Additionally, Peggy would receive an annuity of £4 for the rest of her life. Elbridge also offered an enslaved man named Selvin the option of purchasing his own freedom for the substantial sum of £100.⁷¹ By favoring certain slaves while treating slaves in general as assets, Elbridge exhibited the dualistic view of slavery that most colonists held. The slaves whom she developed personal relationships with would be freed; the majority remained in bondage.

Mary spent most of her adult life working to turn Spring Plantation into a profitable venture for the Elbridge family. The total value of the plantation nearly doubled under her management from £2,571 to £5,714, an estimated £800,000 today.⁷² It was also worth more than the median value of £3,819 for estates inventoried in Jamaica between 1741 and 1745.⁷³ Mary and many other women planters laid the groundwork for sugar to become the principle source of colonial wealth by the 1740s. Her letters tell us that women, too, exhibited the “entrepreneurially minded” zeal of West Indian planters who were always looking for ways to maximize production.⁷⁴ The planter mindset was not an exclusively masculine characteristic, but a shared trait among all free colonists. And it was one that was not limited to Jamaica, or even America. Instead, people throughout the Atlantic world seized on the opportunities generated by the rapid expansion of a porous oceanic marketplace.

⁷¹ Ibid.

⁷² Plantation values from: Burnard, *Planters, Merchants, and Slaves*, 247.

⁷³ Sheridan, *Sugar and Slavery*, 229-231.

⁷⁴ Burnard, *Planters, Merchants, and Slaves*, 22.

Though we may admire her tenacity and acumen, Mary—like the other women studied in this chapter—grew wealthy in part because she effectively managed enslaved people. She commanded nearly one hundred slaves on Spring Plantation; they also constituted the bulk of her wealth: all told, Mary owned twenty-four men, women, and children outright, and held a one-third interest in sixty-seven more. Mary had inherited nine slaves from her husband in 1726. Eighteen years later, she owned an additional fifteen slaves.⁷⁵ While her slaves worked the notoriously unhealthy fields that hosted sugar cane and the dangerous mills that ground it, Mary Elbridge spent part of her time at her Kingston home far removed from the daily noises, smells, and sounds of plantation life. Located close to the harbor, this home likely allowed Mary to maintain ties to Kingston's merchant community that her deceased husband was a member of, affording her the connections necessary for shipping sugar and rum to Bristol. John Elbridge clearly identified Mary as the chief buyer of African slaves for the plantation, and her home—just a short walk from the harbor where the majority of Britain's slaving ships from Africa docked—gave her ready access to the slave market.

⁷⁵ Inventory of Mary Elbridge, 1745, vol. 25, f. 132, JA.

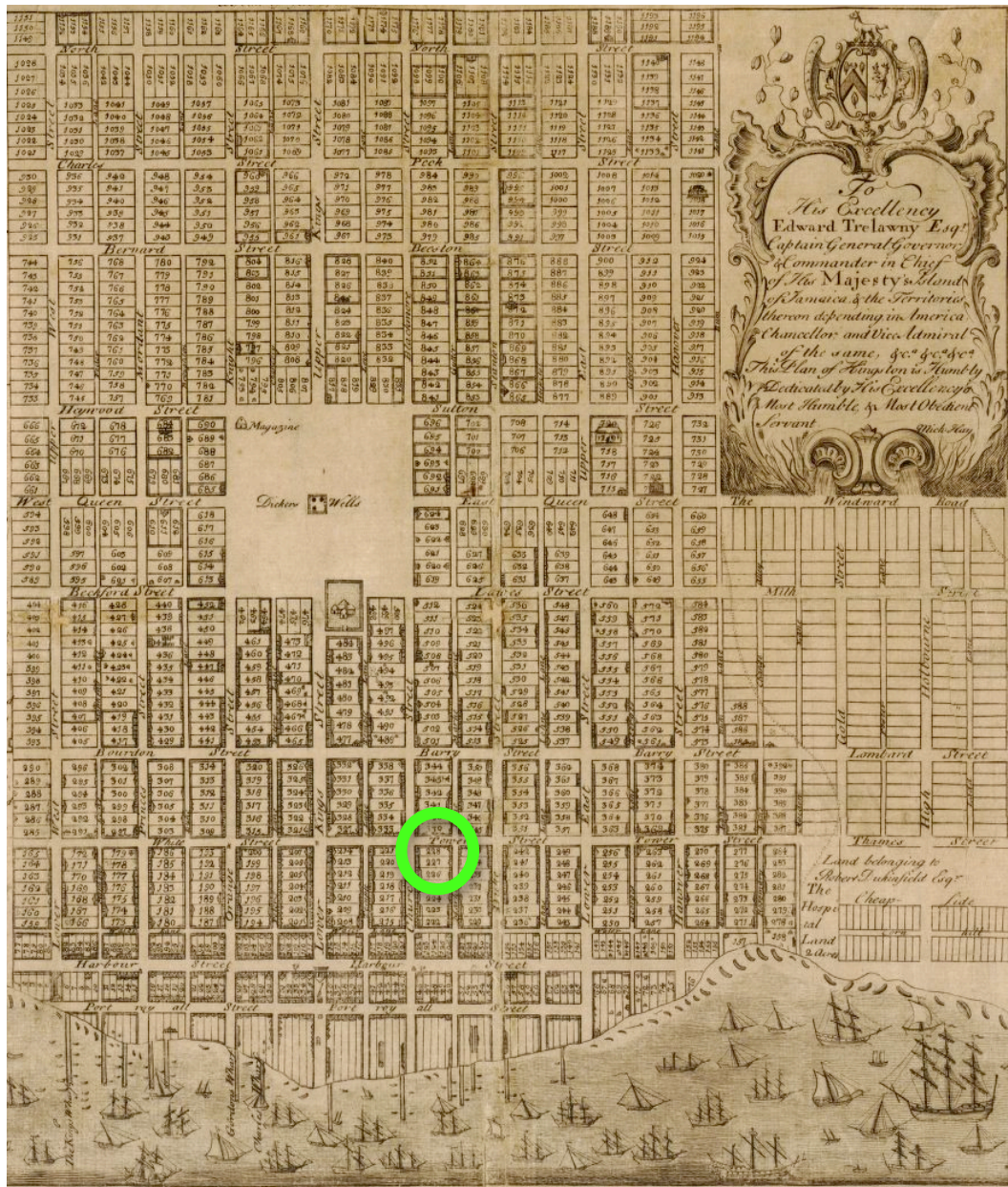


Figure 6.2. Location of Mary Elbridge's house in Kingston. Michael Hay, "Plan of Kingston" (1745, Library of Congress).⁷⁶

Her comfortable house was illuminated by mahogany and gilt sconces, and furnished with elbow and Windsor chairs; she ate off of china using ivory-handled cutlery. Though far from ostentatious, her furnishings were genteel by local and Atlantic standards. Some of Elbridge's slaves would have lived with her in Kingston where they cooked, cleaned,

⁷⁶ Robert Elbridge listed the cross streets for the property in his 1726 will. vol. 17, IRO.

and waited on their owner. They probably slept on the four “old Spanish mats” that lay on the floor or in the “old straw hammock.” In contrast, Mary rested in a bedstead with curtains and mosquito netting worth £14—the most expensive piece of furniture that she owned.⁷⁷

Mary Elbridge died in 1744, having managed Spring Plantation for nearly twenty years. Following her death, Mary's assertions of impoverishment proved to be unfounded. At the time of her passing, she possessed an estate valued at £2,220 (£286,000 today).⁷⁸ Her “loving daughter” Elizabeth inherited the majority of this estate.⁷⁹ Loss may have weakened the resolute Mary. Elizabeth had born a grandson Samuel who died during childhood like one-third of all infants born on the island.⁸⁰ After his death Elizabeth and her husband departed for England, leaving Mary alone, and a friend would later report that her “grief” in “parting with her daughter” resulted in a “flux” or illness. Mary lingered in the “distemper” for three weeks before dying.⁸¹ She asked for a humble burial in a “plain cedar coffin” next to her grandson. Her daughter and deceased grandson were her only family. She had no ancestral grounds of a natal family to be buried in. In life and death, Spring Plantation remained Mary’s home.

Rebecca Woolnough: Multiplying the Plantation’s Fortune

Upon Mary’s death another female relative assumed management of Spring Plantation: Elbridge’s niece, the widow Rebecca Elbridge Woolnough. Rebecca’s assumption of command suggests continuity. The Elbridges had established a tradition of

⁷⁷ Inventory of Mary Elbridge, 1745, vol. 25, f. 132, JA.

⁷⁸ Inventory of Mary Elbridge, 1745, vol. 25, f. 132, JA.

⁷⁹ Will of Robert Elbridge, 1726, vol. 17, IRO.

⁸⁰ Christening of Samuel Dicker, March 2, 1732, Kingston. “Jamaica Church of England Parish Register Transcripts, 1664-1880,” www.familysearch.org

⁸¹ Thomas French to Henry Woolnough, June 4, 1744, Woolnough Papers, Ashton Court Archives, 16/28a, BRO.

placing women in charge. Rebecca's tenure began a third generation of female managers at Spring Plantation, thus establishing a female dynasty of plantation managers. The pattern was not accidental. Members of the Elbridge family consciously decided to place women in positions of authority over the family business. Rebecca's mother was the first widow to inherit; this role then passed to Mary Elbridge and, eventually, to Rebecca. Rather than an anomaly, the pattern was commonplace.⁸² Rebecca, who had struggled in school years earlier, displayed an impressive capacity for the financial side of plantation management. Her husband Henry Woolnough had died a few years earlier. Following his death, Rebecca gained full legal control over her share of the estate.

Rebecca, unlike her mother and aunt, however, lacked firsthand knowledge of sugar cultivation. She represented a growing number of absentee planters who were able to live in Britain, thanks in part to earlier generations of colonists—like her aunt Mary—and their efforts to establish profitable ventures, which provided financial support for relatives in Britain. Rebecca's oversight relocated authority away from the colony to the metropole, following the trajectory of money and power flowing from Jamaica to Britain in the mid-eighteenth century. As an absentee, Rebecca was part of a wealthy minority of island-born transplants with ties to the West Indies—a minority who have received greater attention than the majority of colonists. The historian Perry Gauci also cautions us from interpreting resettlement in Britain as a “rejection” of island life. Instead, men like William Beckford pursued the opportunity to advance their own interests alongside Jamaica's on both sides of the Atlantic.⁸³ Furthermore, Jamaica's appeal to migrants from Britain only increased during the latter half of the eighteenth century as the colony's

⁸² See Chapter Three for more detailed information about women and inheritance in the colony.

⁸³ Gauci, *William Beckford*, 48.

promise of wealth and available land beckoned. Indeed, forty percent of indentured servants leaving from Britain went to Jamaica.⁸⁴ In less than a century, the white population nearly doubled in size, reaching eighteen thousand by 1774.

During Rebecca's tenure, Spring Plantation remained a medium sized estate of 600 acres, one-fifth of which was devoted to sugar cultivation, producing eighty-ninety hogsheads of sugar in a good year.⁸⁵ However, Rebecca's position as an absentee planter insulated her from the harsher realities of colonial enterprise. She did not engage in contests and negotiations with opportunistic neighbors or impose coercive sentences on slaves in person. This dissociation was detrimental to the slave labor force. At a bare minimum, her aunt Mary Elbridge had understood the stark circumstances of slaves' lives and attempted to prevent their untimely deaths, even if her motives were less than altruistic. Rebecca, in contrast, responded blithely to crises in the colony. In 1754, when a severe drought burned all sugar cane and brought the island to the brink of a famine, and Spring's overseers informed her that the slaves were likely to experience a severe food shortage, she nonchalantly replied to that she was "very easy & contented about it, knowing we must submit to God's will; whether it be drought, rains or hurricanes & nothing wou'd cause me uneasiness but to hear of wrong things done on the estate, which hope by your prudent management I shall never hear of."⁸⁶

Instead of concerning herself with state of her crops or the health of her slaves, Rebecca channeled her energies into more meticulous accounting. She possessed formidable bookkeeping skills, it appears, and scrutinized every transaction no matter

⁸⁴ Greene, *Pursuits of Happiness*, 161.

⁸⁵ Burnard, *Planters, Merchants, and Slaves*, 246.

⁸⁶ Rebecca Woolnough to Watson Swymmer & Co., November 4, 1754, Woolnough Papers, Ashton Court Archives, BRO.

how small. The slightest errors in the accounts that she received from her attorneys on the island were carefully recapitulated; when they failed to meet her exacting standards, she responded harshly. In one instance, the attorneys decided to sell sugar and rum locally instead of shipping it to Bristol, which delayed the receipt of her profit somewhat. This infuriated Rebecca, who threatened to fire them: “You don’t use me well and I cannot but resent it, & acquaint you in short that if you don’t remitt me the balance of the year 1756 which is £470.19 soon & remitt me for this years net proceeds earlier than you did the last, I shall look out for other Attorneys.” “I won’t be servd by you or any other *Gentlemen* after this manner,” she fumed in closing her letter. Perhaps Rebecca felt pressured to compensate for her tenuous position as a woman by impressing upon the men that she had the authority to end their employ.⁸⁷ Perhaps, too, Rebecca’s monitoring of accounts and hectoring of attorneys resulted from her status as absentee, with no direct knowledge of how the business ran. She, like male absentees, worried that the men who were managing her affairs in the colony would cheat and hoodwink her. Rebecca may have tried to preempt such a situation by displaying her mastery of the plantation’s finances and threatening her attorneys. Watson and Swymmer responded with humility. “Your threats are something harsh on our being late in remitting,” but they acknowledged “that you had some reason to complain” and promised to “give you no more occasion to write as we to receive such disagreeable letters in future.”⁸⁸ The attorneys were far more concerned with perpetuating their earnings than exercising their masculine prerogatives over a woman.

⁸⁷ Emphasis is my own. Ibid., December 9, 1754, Woolnough Papers, Ashton Court Archives, BRO.

⁸⁸ Watson Swymmer & Co. to Rebecca Woolnough, April 22, 1758, Woolnough Papers, Ashton Court Archives, 27/24b, BRO.

Rebecca was far less involved in orchestrating the daily operations of the plantation than her aunt had been. Her attorneys sold most of the sugar produced on Spring locally and sent her the proceeds as bills of exchange or silver. They also determined what improvements needed to be made on the estate, building a new still house, repairing the sugar works, and returning enslaved people to the fields who had been living in the mountains and growing provisions for the “garden trade.” Five years later, they hired a white indentured servant and bought a hat, shoes, and stockings for him. The sugar mill was also replaced, and ten new mules were purchased for the property.⁸⁹ By 1754 the plantation was making 89 hogsheads of sugar and 27 puncheons of rum, and earning a profit of £1518 per annum—a profit level that would remain stable until the 1780s.⁹⁰ Slavery was never absent from their reports: the attorneys also asked Rebecca to grant their overseer the right to manumit his enslaved son, born to an enslaved “mulatto” woman who belonged to the plantation. In return, the overseer would provide an “able-bodied” adult male slave to the estate.⁹¹

For all her impetuosity, Rebecca Woolnough was a shrewd investor. She kept a keen eye on interest rates and constructed a complex financial portfolio with the money that she earned from Spring Plantation.⁹² Woolnough used the bills of exchange that she received from the sales of Jamaican sugar to buy Bank annuities. By 1753, she held £2,000 in such investments.⁹³ She also bought shares of stock in the East India

⁸⁹ Ibid., July 9, 1755, Woolnough Papers, Ashton Court Archives, 27/18a, BRO.

⁹⁰ Burnard, *Planters, Merchants, and Slaves*, 247.

⁹¹ Watson Swymmer & Co. to Rebecca Woolnough, May 9, 1756, Woolnough Papers, Ashton Court Archives, 27/19a, BRO.

⁹² Spring Plantation was producing seventy to eighty hogsheads of sugar a year. Ibid., June 26, 1757, Woolnough Papers, Ashton Court Archives, 27/21a, BRO.

⁹³ Rebecca Woolnough to Henton Brown & Son, June 17, 1753, Woolnough Papers, Ashton Court Archives, 27/14, BRO.

Company.⁹⁴ Her understanding of finance and its possibilities to multiply in Britain led her to consider any money that was tied up in the colony as a financial loss. When her attorneys failed to sell sugar and quickly remit the proceeds she informed them “I do not like this treatment,” further noting they had caused her to lose eight months of interest on the cash that she could have invested. This was “a loss to me but gain to you, wch should not be.”⁹⁵

In turn, Rebecca’s distant but competent control of the money that flowed from Spring Plantation bolstered the economic and social prospects of yet a fourth generation of Elbridge women. When Rebecca died, her only daughter Elizabeth inherited the family estate. From one generation to the next, Elbridge women effectively parlayed the earnings produced by colonial slaves into imperial wealth, status, and power. They cultivated a fortune that eventually made Elizabeth eligible enough for marrying into a titled and landed family in England. In 1757, more than half a century after Aldworth Eldridge bequeathed Spring Plantation to his two daughters, his granddaughter wed Sir John Hugh Smyth, 2nd Baronet and eldest son of Sir Jarrit Smith, 1st Baronet of Ashton Court.⁹⁶ Elizabeth reportedly brought a considerable estate in England and Jamaica to the union: she was worth roughly £40,000, or an estimated five million pounds in today’s economy.⁹⁷ She was just one of many people in Britain with ties to the West Indies who married into the titled or landed aristocracy of England.⁹⁸

⁹⁴ Ibid., November 21, 1751, Woolnough Papers, Ashton Court Archives, 16/37, BRO.

⁹⁵ Rebecca Woolnough to Watson, Grant & Co., December 18, 1752, Woolnough Papers, Ashton Court Archives, BRO.

⁹⁶ Ashton Court is located in Bristol. The property is now owned by the city and open to the public.

⁹⁷ Spring Plantation, Jamaica, Woolnough Papers, Ashton Court Archives, WO 16, BRO; Number calculated using “Measuring Worth.”

⁹⁸ West Indians successfully intermarried with the nobility and gentry, including the Duke of Ancaster, the Earl of Effingham, the Earl of Buchanan, the Earl of Abercorn, the Earl of Home, the Earl of Carlhampton,

As the Elbridge correspondence chronicles, female involvement in Jamaica plantation management extended far beyond the bounds of the big house or town house. Widows who assumed legal control of estates were expected to actively administer family businesses—and did. This involved mastery of a wide range of skills, from knowledge of sugar cultivation and Atlantic trading to skill in investing in Britain's emerging financial markets. The competence that widows displayed in business affairs immediately after their husbands died, and subsequent family decision-making that kept and placed women in charge, indicates they were involved in plantation affairs before and during their marriages. In a colony where women were likely to outlive men and free people normally did not survive beyond the age of fifty, families needed to ensure that male and female relatives were groomed to seamlessly assume the responsibilities of operating plantations. Even the young awkward scholar Rebecca Elbridge gained mastery of the fundamentals of finance sufficient to multiply the fortune several-fold.

Anna Eliza Elletson: The Plantation's Peak Years

During the second half of the eighteenth century, planters like Rebecca Woolnough built on the groundwork laid by her aunt, investing the proceeds of colonial earnings into an imperial economy. From the colony to the metropole, they helped to develop a very “modern” form of enterprise years before the industrial revolution of the nineteenth century: one that made Jamaica Britain's preeminent colony.⁹⁹ Yet, the entire system was powered by slave labor, rendering its very foundation precarious. In 1760, fifteen hundred slaves launched a massive insurrection, killing at least fifty white people

the Earl of Radnor, the Earl of Portmore, Lord Rivers, and Lord St. John. O'Shaughnessy, *An Empire Divided*, 15.

⁹⁹ Burnard describes the plantation as a modern institution in: *Planters, Merchants, and Slaves*, 24.

and causing extensive property damage. Five hundred enslaved people died during the uprising and another five hundred were transported from the island.¹⁰⁰ The event, called “Tacky’s Rebellion,” showed the potential for slaves to refuse their condition and wreak havoc on plantations. A decade later the growing abolitionist movement in Britain and America began to pose a serious threat to the slave trade, which Jamaican planters relied so heavily on.

At this point in time, the Elbridge women had ceased to be involved in estate management. However, letters written later in the eighteenth century by another widow planter, Anna Eliza Elletson, help to elucidate our understanding of women’s involvement in plantation agriculture and slave labor on an industrial scale at the very moment when slavery was coming under attack.¹⁰¹ Like the Elbridge women, Anna inherited her family’s venture, Hope Plantation, and assumed full responsibility for managing it after her husband, Roger Hope Elletson, died. She represented the English upper crust that families like the Elbridges were successfully marrying into during the second half of the eighteenth century—a prospect made possible by the tremendous wealth West Indian colonists were generating from the plantation system. Anna was the daughter of Richard Gamon and Elizabeth Grace and she grew up in Hertfordshire, England.¹⁰² Her birth date is unknown but her brother Richard Grace Gamon was born in 1748. Thus, Anna was likely born in the 1740s or early 50s near the end of Mary

¹⁰⁰ Vincent Brown has created a useful website detailing and mapping the events of Tacky’s Rebellion. *Slave Revolt in Jamaica, 1760-1761: A Cartographic Narrative*, 2012, <http://revolt.axismaps.com/index.php>

¹⁰¹ For an interesting interpretation of Anna Eliza, Duchess of Chandos’ activities as a plantation manager and her views on enslaved people see Sturtz, “The “Dimduke.”

¹⁰² See the genealogical website: “Family Search,” 2014, <https://familysearch.org/>

Elbridge's life. Unlike Mary Elbridge or Rebecca Woolnough, who were born in Jamaica, Anna's tie to the island was initiated through marriage.

In the early 1770s, Anna married Roger Hope Elletson, who had served as Governor of Jamaica for a brief period (1766-1767). Roger was born in Jamaica in 1727 and grew up on Hope Plantation in St. Andrews Parish—the same parish that also housed Spring Plantation (barely some eight miles from it). Major Richard Hope established Hope Plantation in the 1660s soon after the English conquest of Jamaica. A cattle pen supported Hope until Roger's father Thomas Hope Elletson began planting sugar on the property in the first half of the eighteenth century.¹⁰³ Roger apparently relocated in England soon after his governorship where he met and married Anna Eliza Gamon. Anna, like Rebecca Woolnough and Mary Elbridge before her, assumed full control of Hope Plantation when her husband Roger died in 1775. But Hope was significantly larger than Spring Plantation and maintained a labor force of nearly four hundred slaves. Anna managed the estate through her marriage to James Brydges, the 3rd Duke of Chandos in 1777.¹⁰⁴ Anna enjoyed the luxury of physical distance from the daily realities of working with slaves. She also oversaw the operations of Hope Plantation nearly fifty years after Mary Elbridge began directing affairs on Spring Plantation. Her position as a wealthy widow whose husband once held a prestigious political post gave her real authority and power, which her gender did not dilute.

Though an absentee planter who never seems to have stepped foot in Jamaica, she possessed a comprehensive knowledge of her husband's plans for the plantation, and wrote authoritatively to her managers on the subject: "I know it was the intention of Mr.

¹⁰³ Higman, *Jamaica Surveyed*, 123.

¹⁰⁴ For more on Anna Elletson see: Sturtz, "The "Dimduke"; Vere Oliver, *Caribbean* 3 (1914), 42.

Elletson, that all the debts due to him in Jamaica, that you may recover, should be appropriated to the improving Hope estate.” Indeed, it would have been strange if Roger Elletson had insulated his wife from the complex business dealings that his family fortune had rested upon, for Anna was not the first woman to play an authoritative role in Roger’s financial affairs. His widowed mother, Susannah Elletson, managed the family plantations during her lifetime. Susannah displayed the same business competence and willingness to confront men over financial matters as the other women studied here. She rebuked one son-in-law James Ord for charging her a high interest rate on a Hope mortgage. Susannah sought to elicit his sympathy, noting she was in poor health and “just able to walk about the house with my stick,” before leveling a sharp critique of him: he had broken his promise to reduce the interest on her mortgage. Susannah reminded him of a conversation they had held during a coach ride together, when he claimed that his “intention was to serve myself and family for that you should not charge more than five percent interest.”¹⁰⁵ She wryly informed him that “actions to me are the only proof, words I have long found to bear very little meaning,” before referring to her gendered position and the “difficulties I have laboured under since a Widow.”¹⁰⁶ Only a heartless, unfeeling man would take advantage of a sickly old woman.

Twenty years later, Susannah Elletson’s son’s widow—Anna Eliza Elletson—assumed control of Hope Plantation. Anna was a strong woman who outlived two husbands and suffered through at least two miscarriages. Though she lacked her first husband Roger Elletson’s direct experience with agricultural administration, she directed the operations at the large sugar plantation worked by hundreds of slaves. Nor, when she

¹⁰⁵ Susannah Elletson to James Ord, May 1758, Stowe Brydges Correspondence, Box 25, HL.

¹⁰⁶ Ibid.

married into an aristocratic English family in 1777, did she relinquish authority as absentee overseer. Her second husband James Brydges, the 3rd Duke of Chandos, could have exercised his right under coverture to assume authority over Hope plantation but he made no effort to interfere with his wife's work for nearly a decade after their marriage.¹⁰⁷

Like the other women studied in this chapter, Anna Eliza Elletson presented herself as an authoritative and competent person with a firm grasp of business matters to the male attorneys and overseers who worked on her colonial plantation. She occasionally invoked the requisite gestures of feminine weakness; plantation management, she noted, "seldom happens to be the subject of contemplation with Women."¹⁰⁸ Such statements merely paid homage to gender conventions. The majority of Anna's letters to men in Jamaica were filled with instructions and plans for her plantation and better disposition of its sugar. In one letter, she ordered her overseer to ensure that the sugar produced was "as white as possible, as the quantity that comes to this market, renders brown sugars almost unsalable."¹⁰⁹ Of the sugar trade she possessed an almost comprehensive understanding. She even considered purchasing a waterfront property, where she would build a private wharf to ship her sugar from Jamaica to England.

As absentee, Anna cultivated and manifested an especially keen interest in agricultural science, whereas Rebecca before her had developed a mastery of accounting. Since the island was plagued by periodic droughts, she devised plans for watering her crops more effectively. Anna sent detailed instructions to her colonial managers that

¹⁰⁷ Anna Eliza married her second husband James Brydges, 3rd Duke of Chandos in 1777 and became Duchess of Chandos.

¹⁰⁸ Anna Eliza Elletson to John Pool and Edmund East, January 17, 1776, Stowe Brydges Correspondence, ST 14 vol. 2, HL.

¹⁰⁹ Anna Eliza Elletson to William Ballard, January 13, 1776, in *ibid.*

described how to prevent water runoff: “I presume you will order the trenches to be dug crosswise instead of perpendicular & to bank the trenches up.”¹¹⁰ She even suggested that they employ fire engines to irrigate the fields. Anna was a powerful saleswoman, relentlessly marketing her ideas to attorneys and overseers in Jamaica. “If I might be allowed to be counsel in my own cause,” she once wrote them, “I think the purchase of collard’s estate would secure to me the whole of the water, free from molestation.”¹¹¹ She referred to watering the plantation as “that favourite scheme of mine.”

Anna was fully immersed in the Enlightenment-inspired ethos of rational and scientific improvement, which flourished at the end of the eighteenth century. She believed that the practices of sugar cultivation on the island were backward and sought to introduce British farming methods on the plantation, instructing her overseers to teach the slaves “our methods of plowing, and harrowing.”¹¹² Anna’s passion for agricultural experimentation situated her in a broader Atlantic culture of plantation improvement that the historian Trevor Burnard has described as “expansive, flexible, and innovative.” The scientific approach towards “improvement” farming was not something that the metropole imposed on the colony. As Burnard observes, numerous patents were created in the West Indies for inventions improving milling and processing machinery, and Jamaica was the first place in the Americas to apply steam power to a manufacturing process. Similarly, new sowing and seeding techniques were tried out there first.¹¹³

In her desire to experiment with innovative farming techniques, Anna resembles more famous American planters such as Landon Carter and Thomas Jefferson. All sought

¹¹⁰ Anna Eliza Elletson to John Pool and Edmund East, January 17, 1776, Stowe Brydges Correspondence, ST 14 vol. 2, HL.

¹¹¹ Ibid., November 10, 1780, Stowe Brydges Correspondence, Box 25, HL.

¹¹² Ibid., January 17, 1776, Stowe Brydges Correspondence, ST 14 vol. 2, HL.

¹¹³ Burnard, *Planters, Merchants, and Slaves*, 22.

to deploy Enlightenment-inspired scientific and economic improvements to the plantation system. Indeed she would have found it easier, as in Bristol she would have enjoyed access to the debates and presentations of improvement societies that were cropping up in all of Britain's major cities, and to the articles and pamphlets on agricultural improvement that were first published in Britain. Like Carter and Jefferson, too, Elletson relied upon enslaved workers to execute her plans and schemes. The scientific approach toward plantation management could have dire consequences for slaves. Elletson's distance from the colony dissociated her: it heightened detached perception of slaves as cogs in the machinery that made her sugar enterprise run. Rationalized as economic assets, they were only valued for their ability to labor, which Elletson sought to preserve in order to profit. In one letter, she ordered her overseers to purchase more slaves, which would "be a great saving of the labor of the negroes."¹¹⁴ Such directives tied Elletson to the slave trade and increased the transportation of human cargo from Africa to the Caribbean.

Although at a great distance from the island Anna took an active interest in the agricultural and business affairs of Hope. In addition to proposing a sophisticated scheme for irrigating the sugar crops in times of drought, she sent an English farmer to the island to teach the field slaves how to plow and harrow the English way, which she believed would be more effective and preserve the soil's fertility. Anna also wanted another sugar work to be built on the estate, and asked her attorneys to repair the dwelling house and the offices as she enlarged Hope with the purchase of more land and slaves.¹¹⁵ But her improvements were easily destroyed. In 1780, the still house for distilling rum was burnt

¹¹⁴ Anna Eliza Elletson to John Pool and Edmund East, January 17, 1776, Stowe Brydges Correspondence, ST 14 vol. 2, HL.

¹¹⁵ Ibid.

down when a slave held a lantern too close to the alcohol. The fire destroyed all of the liquor and utensils in the still, and Anna faulted the white servants for failing to keep adequate watch.¹¹⁶ Nor was she shielded from the realities of interracial sex between free and enslaved people on the plantation. Two men, the distiller and the bookkeeper, petitioned her to free the children they had with enslaved women, each offering money or adult male slaves in exchange.¹¹⁷

Anna's absence from and lack of first-hand knowledge of the plantation necessitated more detailed information from the attorneys and overseers who managed it. Thus, the Elletson-Brydges correspondence captures more fully the bleak realities of plantation life for slaves.¹¹⁸ Both Roger and later his widow were poor planners and failed to invest resources in the care of slaves. They created a toxic environment where slaves suffered from chronic famines, diseases, injuries, and death. Malnutrition or the "want of provisions" remained an ongoing problem. The planters reduced their overhead by requiring slaves to grow the majority of their own food, which they were allotted one day per week to cultivate. Planters devised the provision ground system as one means of maximizing production and profit.¹¹⁹ As a result, slave provisions were particularly vulnerable to the frequent droughts and hurricanes that hit the island. Furthermore, alternative supplies shipped to the island were often stalled or captured as a result of frequent inter-European wars and privateering activities. Famines were a common occurrence on the plantation and hard laboring slaves lacked the nutrients to effectively fight off disease, let alone meet the demands of sugar cultivation.

¹¹⁶ John Pool to Anna Eliza Elletson, May 15, 1780, Stowe Brydges Correspondence, Box 26, HL.

¹¹⁷ Edmund East to Anna Eliza Elletson, May 16, 1776, Stowe Brydges Correspondence, Box 25, HL.

¹¹⁸ Anna Eliza Elletson married James Brydges, 3rd Duke of Chandos, in 1777, two years after the death of her first husband Robert Hope Elletson.

¹¹⁹ Burnard, *Planters, Merchants, and Slaves*, 22.

A List of Negroes on Hope Estate taken 1st January 1775

House Men	Harry St. Harry Hannibal Hope Kavannah Hereford Jackey Ben John Solathian Hepple London My Lord Mercury Lancashire Ned Nero Oronoko Primus H. Primus M. Prince H. Prince Ling. Peter John Philip Peter Port Loyall	Sammy } Sams Gory } Johnny M. Quash. Jacob, Suky's Jack, Fick's Marris } Sylvias Harro } Quaw, diannas George, Whanica's America, Mary's Forrington, Franky's Tom, Phendys Tommy, Quash. Quashe, Betty's Quashe, Chels James, Tibbys Jeffry, Liddys Nichom, A. Sally, Pric's Markwell, Quash. Cromwell, Betty's Moriman, Marci's Wackey, nannys Roger, Subai Quaw, Siny's Will. M. Lacey's	Ludlow Tumbler Will Ebo House Women Dianna Bets Saphine Syky Marina Mary Amy Quasheba Betty Lettigence Betty Umba Field Women Abba Bromy Abba H. Umba C. Umba J. Amy Bennaba H. Bennaba M. Barbary	Liddy H. Lucinda Maria L. Maria L. Marina madam Molly Molly Nadny Nancy E. Phebe C. Phebe G. Phillis G. Phillis E. Catherine Queen Quasheba M. Quasheba H. Ron Long Ron Atale H. Sylvia M. Sylvia Suky M. Syky C. Syky P. Sallinda Saphina Sally Whanica M. Whanica E. Venus H.
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Figure 6.3. One-page sample of the list of enslaved people who lived on Hope Plantation in 1775, when Anna Eliza Elletson assumed ownership of the estate. It includes “House Women” and a partial list of the “Field Women” who labored on Elletson’s property. “A List of Negroes on Hope Estate” (1775, HL).

Colonial overseers and attorneys reported the casualties that financed the Elletson fortune in nearly every letter sent to England. A diversity of illnesses that often proved to be fatal—including lock jaw, ulcers, dropsy and the “belly ache”—plagued slaves.”¹²⁰ In a typical letter, overseer Richard Rutland listed the deaths of six people: “two of them [were] invalids,” a man named London died of “distemper,” Lock eyed Peter had consumption, Suky was a paralytic, and Pleasant Dor died from a lesion on his “disabled

¹²⁰ Joseph Stewart to Robert Hope Elletson, May 13 1769; Joseph Stewart to Robert Hope Elletson, June 25 1769, Stowe Brydges Correspondence, ST 14, vol. 1, HL.

arm.”¹²¹ The young were particularly susceptible to fatal illnesses. Overseer Humphrey Grant noted that many of the children “died of the yaws & hooping cough, w. last disorder raged much in this island for some time past & proved fatal to numbers of children of all colours.”¹²²



Figure 6.4. A section of a plan of Hope Plantation made in 1788. The “Negro Grounds,” identified at the top of the figure, were allotted to slaves to grow their own food. Severe weather regularly destroyed enslaved people’s provision grounds and led to starvation. “A Plan of Hope Plantation, in the parish of Saint Andrew, Jamaica belonging to the Duke of Chandos” (1788, HL).

Children, in particular, suffered from a lack of food and died at alarming rates. Though Roger Elletson blamed infant mortality on the “carelessness of the midwives or the mothers,” the children needed food. The plantation’s on-site attorney Edmund East

¹²¹ Richard Rutland to Robert Hope Elletson, September 21 1772, in *ibid.*

¹²² Humphrey Grant to Robert Hope Elletson, August 27 1770, in *ibid.*

devised a plan for providing them with one “good meal a day.”¹²³ He had them “washed & brought to the house, where one of the white people sees them eat.” Rather than addressing the underlying cause, both men adopted a “blame the victim” approach, placing the burden on enslaved women for inadequate childcare. Only supervision by “white people” would ensure that enslaved children would grow “well fed & fat.” Utilitarian concerns rather than ethical beliefs drove Roger to implement East’s plan. Preserving the lives of young slaves enabled them to “work in the field 3 or 4 years sooner than otherwise they could.” As East stressed, this small expenditure on food would be “of great benefit to an estate.”¹²⁴ Such planning reveals the mindset of profit-driven scientific rationalism shaping plantation management, which had dire consequences for enslaved people.

Despite feeding the most vulnerable members of the slave community one meal a day, overall conditions did not improve. During Anna Elletson’s stewardship, a drought destroyed the slaves’ provisions in 1776 and they were once again reduced to near starvation. Though she wanted to purchase more slaves, East warned her against doing so, as they had no means to feed additional mouths. The situation became critical and East wrote to her that her “negroes are in great want of provisions.” He resorted to purchasing plantains for them in town; this at least “prevented a famine.” The extent of malnourishment on the plantation was evident in East’s report later in the year. Slaves were now stealing sugar cane for sustenance: “indeed negroes will now run all risks to

¹²³ Robert Hope Elletson to Humphrey Grant, August 25 1771, Stowe Brydges Correspondence, Elletson, Roger Hope, Letters to and from Jamaica, ST 14, vol. 2, HL.

¹²⁴ Edmund East to Roger Hope Elletson, August 19 1772, Stowe Brydges Correspondence, Elletson, Roger Hope, Letters to and from Jamaica, ST 14, vol. 1, HL.

get food of any sort; such scarcity has not been known in this island.”¹²⁵ They continued to provide “daily provision” for the children, which was a great necessity “as the parents of many of them had nothing to give them” during the drought.

Anna Elletson attempted to aid the famished people by sending flour and beans to the island, but her lack of knowledge about local conditions rendered her “generous supply” less than useful. As East commented, “the flour was rather too much as that article will keep but a little time in this country,” and the slaves did not “like” beans but would they would be “a good stand by in case of necessity.”¹²⁶ A year later, a new overseer reported that the slaves were in better condition than they had been in two years. Still they had “want of provisions.” Many of the elderly slaves had died of dysentery and there were few births. As usual, they purchased new slaves to fill the void and he promised that the “children” would be “taken the greatest care of.”¹²⁷

The conditions on Hope and the decisions that both Roger and Anna Elletson made to cope with them fit into a pattern evident decades earlier in Mary Elbridge’s reluctance to support elderly slaves who were “worn out” and no longer useful laborers on the plantation. Enslaved people were caught up in a system designed by free men and women alike that produced wealth at the expense of human life. In the late eighteenth century, Anna Elletson still preferred to replace diminishing populations with new slaves directly imported from Africa as Mary Elbridge had done, rather than improve the quality of slaves’ lives. Participation in a plantation culture that was sustained through coercion and violence also connected Anna Elletson to her predecessor Mary Elbridge. Though

¹²⁵ Edmund East to Anna Eliza Elletson, October 29, 1776, Stowe Brydges Correspondence, Box 25, HL.

¹²⁶ Edmund East to Anna Eliza Elletson, March 19, 1777, in *ibid.*

¹²⁷ James Concannon to Anna Eliza, Duchess of Chandos, February 26, 1778, in *ibid.*

living overseas, Anna would have been fully aware of the intermittent brutality with which her slaves were subjected to.

The Elletsons' great distance from Hope allowed abusive plantation overseers greater license to exploit the slaves. Overseer John Stewart committed countless "acts of inhumanity" against slaves, requiring them to work seven days a week while severely reducing their food rations and subjecting them to brutal punishment. So dire were the circumstances that a slave named Mungola Robin was "quite worn out with fatigue and nothing to support nature, laid himself down in the field on Saturday evening and was found dead on Monday morn." Stewart, it was rumored, was so severe that he murdered three or four slaves.¹²⁸ Attorney John Poole who worked with Edmund East to locally manage the plantation wrote to Roger Elletson in horror: "Gracious god! –was it possible for any man to conceive that a negroe loaded with irons and confined in the stocks every night could work or even support life at least for any time with such a small scanty allowance as a pint of flour a day."¹²⁹ A distraught Roger responded: "My matters seem to be so universally in a state of destruction that I hardly know what to mention to you first" and asked his attorneys to care for "those poor creatures who have escaped the cruelty of that savage fiend."¹³⁰

Though Roger and Anna expressed outrage at the cruelties inflicted by overseers, neither he nor his wife could shield slaves who lived thousands of miles away from pernicious employees. The couple's distance from the plantation enabled them to adopt the postures of dissociated, if humanitarian slave owners. The urge to self-consciously

¹²⁸ Richard Rutland Roger Hope Elletson, October 13 1770, in *ibid*.

¹²⁹ John Pool to Roger Hope Elletson, November 30 1769, Stowe Brydges Correspondence, ST 14, vol. 1, HL.

¹³⁰ Robert Hope Elletson to John Pool, February 2, 1770, Stowe Brydges Correspondence, ST 14, vol. 2, HL.

fashion themselves as sympathetic to the needs of their “poor creatures” while continuing to benefit financially from the fruits of slave labor captures the tension between sentimental values and economic reality. The Elletsons were planters in a new era, one in which morality was increasingly identified with emotional sensitivity and sympathy—a sentimental, Enlightened culture that was incompatible with slavery. In 1765, the great English legal scholar William Blackstone wrote a scathing attack of slavery in Book One of his *Commentaries on the Laws of England*. There, Blackstone described the kind of absolute slavery that existed in Jamaica as “repugnant to reason” and the “principles of natural law,” and as abhorrent to English law.¹³¹ The tide was turning against the type of plantation system that people like the Elletsons were so deeply invested in.

As Blackstone’s critique suggests, absentee West Indian planters residing in Britain lived at a time that was increasingly hostile towards slavery. Accounts of the cruelties of Jamaican planters, in particular, led to public censure of slave owners.¹³² The Elletsons found themselves managing Hope Plantation in the midst of these burgeoning political and social movements, which clearly influenced the rhetoric that they employed in discussing slavery. During the early decades of the abolitionist movement, planters began to present themselves as benevolent slaveholders—a temporary means of staving off the charges of slavery’s cruelty. Roger Elletson embraced such an approach, repeatedly ordering his employees to ensure that none of the slaves on Hope were subjected to brutality. He reminded one overseer that he was to be “extraordinarily careful to avoid all unnecessary and severe punishments I would wish to have my labor

¹³¹ William Blackstone, *Commentaries on the Laws of England*, Vol. 1, (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1765), 411-412.

¹³² For more on the relationship between the emergence of humanitarian discourses and the Abolitionist movement see Christopher Brown, *Moral Capital: Foundations of British Abolitionism* (Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina Press, 2006).

performed as much as may be with content & cheerfulness not in fear & misery.”¹³³

Elletson admonished Rutland for placing slaves who ran away in chains, stressing that “the avoiding all severe / take notice of the word / I say severe punishments of the former, for I will not have them exercised where I have anything to do.”¹³⁴ Roger, who had grown up in Jamaica, now imagined a slavery that was not “severe” in nature; a condition of servitude that no longer required the external theater of horrors—the chains and the whip—to enforce submission. Instead, he fantasized that the slaves who labored in his sugar fields would do so cheerfully and peacefully. It was a fantasy that had little bearing on reality.

When Anna Elletson assumed command in 1775, she too sought to portray herself as a magnanimous mistress, asking her colonial attorneys and overseer “to continue that humane plan” that her late husband had employed and “never to use any correction” on the slaves “unless you see it absolutely necessary, to preserve that authority with which you are invested.” She then continued: “I beg you will assure them of my affection towards them and I firmly rely on your goodness, and humanity, to comply with my wished for their welfare.”¹³⁵ The historian Linda Sturtz has written a useful study of Anna Elletson in which she describes the woman’s approach towards her slaves as “paternalistic,” condescending, and racist, which it certainly was.¹³⁶ Nevertheless, the writing of Roger and Anna also exhibits the powerful influence of sentimental values that

¹³³ Robert Hope Elletson to Richard Rutland, May 16 1772, Stowe Brydges Correspondence, ST 14, vol. 2, HL.

¹³⁴ Robert Hope Elletson to Richard Rutland, September 5 1773, in *ibid.*

¹³⁵ Anna Eliza Elletson to William Ballard, January 13, 1776, in *ibid.*

¹³⁶ Linda Sturtz highlights Anna’s efforts to be a “humane” slave owner, but demonstrates that her “condescension” towards slaves “permeated” her letters. This chapter frames Anna’s complex attitude toward her slaves within the context of her late husband’s approach. Both husband and wife employed the rhetoric of sentimentality and humanitarianism to represent themselves as slave owners. “The “Dimduke,” 16.

suffused British culture during the second half of the eighteenth century. Indeed, the couple imagined themselves as sentimental slaveholders. While the sentimental slaveholder might seem to be an oxymoron, slave owners co-opted the language of feeling in an effort to transform themselves into sympathetic characters.

The glaring contradiction between sentiment and slavery required the sentimental slaveholder to perform a sort of jujitsu with logic. Anna Elletson frequently employed this kind of discursive strategy. Anna, even more removed from the reality of slavery than her late husband, crafted a sympathetic relationship based on the fictive bonds of affection she shared with hundreds of enslaved people whom she had never met. She instructed her overseer to “never to use any correction” on her slaves and asked him to “assure them of my affection towards them.”¹³⁷ In Anna’s fantasy they would appreciate and perhaps even reciprocate her “affection,” a word that she employed to describe her husband’s sentiments towards two elderly slaves. She asked the overseer to ensure that they were “well taken care of, in sickness or health, and their respective situations rendered as comfortable as possible.”¹³⁸ The overseer ensured her that he would “render their situation in life as happy as possibly I can, being well acquainted with their dispositions, & in what manner they ought to be treated.”¹³⁹ To believe a condition premised on the destruction of personhood and humanity could ever be humane, could ever lead to happiness, required a willful compartmentalization of life’s many facets.

Anna employed the language of feeling and affection when describing her attitude toward slaves. Despite this rhetorical strategy, Anna’s main interests were as empirical

¹³⁷ Anna Eliza Elletson to William Ballard, January 13, 1776, Stowe Brydges Correspondence, mssSTB Correspondence Box 25, HL.

¹³⁸ Ibid.

¹³⁹ William Ballard to Anna Eliza Elletson, May 15 1776, in *ibid.*

and financially motivated as Mary Elbridge's had been years earlier. Slave deaths resulted in the loss of profits, and she continually sought out new strategies that would improve the plantation's earnings. Anna fretted over the "loss" of one slave named Bacchus not because she was saddened by his death but because Bacchus was a skilled worker who ran the still house where the plantation's rum was produced. A replacement would be difficult to find, as well as expensive. On another occasion, she determined that it would be more profitable to reclaim a group of slaves who were leased out to work in another planter's cattle pen and return them to Hope to work the cane fields: "I have always been of opinion, that the rent he pays for them, is by no means adequate to the use they might be of, even as weeders."¹⁴⁰

Like her husband, Anna professed an interest in the happiness of her slaves. Yet, she was a shrewd businesswoman who was ultimately motivated by economic bottom-lines. A severe disjuncture existed between the rhetoric Roger and Anna Elletson used to describe how they wanted slaves to be treated and the reality of plantation life. Husband and wife implemented minor reforms and blustered against cruelty, yet neither made any significant improvement in the quality of slaves' lives. Nor were they really interested in doing so. As many of the Elletson correspondents attested, slave mortality resulting from disease and malnutrition was endemic in the colony. The provision crops that enslaved people planted to feed themselves with were destroyed by droughts and hurricanes. Both husband and then wife handled the loss of slaves by purchasing "new" slaves brought from Africa.

¹⁴⁰ Anna Eliza Elletson to William Ballard, January 13, 1776, Stowe Brydges Correspondence, ST 14, vol. 2, HL.

Anna Elletson's skillful management of Hope Plantation's business and the confidence she projected in letters all came to an end when her second husband James Brydges, 3rd Duke of Chandos, died suddenly in 1789. An unsympathetic descendant would blame Anna for the Duke's death, claiming she pulled a chair out from under him leading to an accident, and describing her as "vain and extravagant" woman possessing "great animal spirits." But such a portrayal is not born out by the Duke's obituary, which attributed his death to a "short" but "most painful illness."¹⁴¹ Whatever the circumstances of his death, the loss of her husband unmoored Anna. She was certified as insane just two years after his death, and nearly died from a laudanum overdose in 1798. The Dowager Duchess spent the remainder of her life a mentally ill woman at a family house on the outskirts of London and died in 1813. Upon her death, her daughter Anna inherited an estate of £6,500 that joined Britain's imperial interests in Ireland and Jamaica to England. Once again, a woman assumed authority over her family's interest.

Conclusion

The letters written by Mary Elbridge, Rebecca Woolnough, and Anna Eliza Elletson, further our understanding of how women envisioned themselves as land managers and slave owners and then acted—or failed to act—on that vision. Their histories offer fresh insight into women's roles as plantation managers. Women handled every aspect of the plantation complex, including the agriculture, production, and the sale of colonial goods. They introduced new farming techniques, oversaw large construction projects, and installed complicated machinery to process sugar and rum. Women planters

¹⁴¹ Quoted from John Temple, *The Temple Memoirs: An Account of This Historic Family and Its Demesnes, with Biographical Sketches, Anecdotes & Legends From Saxon Times to the Present Day* (London: H.F. and G. Witherby, 1925).

also managed their free and enslaved staff, sometimes providing hundreds of people with food, clothing, medical care, and salaries. Finally, they sold their goods overseas, which entailed working relations with merchants and ship captains. All the while, these women kept detailed accounting records of every business transaction they engaged in. While male overseers and attorneys certainly worked with them, male planters were equally reliant on white professional staff. Ultimately, women who owned plantations bore responsibility for the success or failure of their ventures.

Their business activities demonstrate that women actively helped to construct a society that relied upon the labor-intensive production of consumer crops. Though the surviving letters of middling and wealthy women shape our understanding of female attitudes towards plantation management—because only their letters have surfaced---other documents suggest that women from all levels of society worked as planters. Families that benefited from colonial agriculture could not afford to consign female relations to domestic spaces and activities that were typified as feminine. Instead, women were raised with an understanding of how to cultivate crops, to export colonial goods overseas for a profit, and to wring every ounce of labor out of the enslaved people who produced their fortunes.

In wielding authority over hundreds of slaves, women planters would seem to exceed the customary bounds of female authority. They were not merely “deputy husbands” who assumed temporary responsibility for family businesses in the absence of household patriarchs. Instead, they survived and prospered independently based upon their abilities to strategically and sometimes mercilessly wring income from sickly or malnourished enslaved laborers. Women planters wielded nearly absolute power over

slaves: they had the authority to buy, sell, punish, and—occasionally—free people. The evidence should make us skeptical about the degree to which men in Jamaica and Britain actively excluded women from professions that have been portrayed as masculine. Their entry may not have been *ab initio*, entering as they did on the deaths of husbands. Yet they and women like them nonetheless shouldered significant agricultural, financial, and legal responsibilities. Most significantly, they assumed enormous power over the fates of enslaved human beings.

The contrast between how the Elbridge and Elletson women chose to represent themselves as slave owners signifies an important change. Slavery was not as readily and unquestioningly accepted in 1775, as it had been in the first half of the eighteenth century. People's perceptions of slavery were altering. But perceptions had little influence on the reality of slaves' lives. As a lived experience, slavery remained strikingly similar over the course of the eighteenth century. Mary Elbridge understood the implications of the kind of world she helped to build as a planter, once observing "times is so hard and every body has negros that hear is more then the place wants."¹⁴² She acknowledged the precariousness of plantation society, where the slave population dwarfed free people and continually threatened to revolt and destroy the system that generated so much wealth for the elite few. Elbridge's words also show how slavery, not gender, had become the central issue at stake in Jamaica.

¹⁴² Mary Elbridge to Rebecca Elbridge, July 29, 1737, Woolnough Papers, Ashton Court Archives, BRO.

CONCLUSION

“Tis plain mankind never owned nor considered any such natural subjection that they were born in, to one or to the other that tied them without their own consents, to a subjection to them and their heirs.”
- John Locke¹

Over thirty years after Margaret Cavendish published *The Blazing World*—the text that opened my inquiry—John Locke published *The Second Treatise of Government* in 1690. Locke deconstructed the prevailing political paradigm in Stuart England, which equated the Crown’s sovereign political power with men’s patriarchal authority with the family. He argued that patriarchal power did not exist within the natural world created by God.² Therefore, it was unnatural for men and the King to claim absolute authority in the home or the country. Locke championed more egalitarian relationships between men and women, parents and children. *The Second Treatise of Government* argued that slavery violated man’s natural freedom. Enslavement or captivity, he reasoned, was only an alternative punishment to death in a state of war.

Yet, Locke’s views on slavery, unlike his critique of traditional gender relations, were more murky and contradictory than *The Second Treatise of Government* acknowledges. In 1670, at the same time that the Royal African Company was gaining a foothold in Jamaica, Locke became intimately involved with the African slave trade and

¹ John Locke, *The Second Treatise of Government* (Mineola: Dover Publications, 2002), 53.

² Ibid., 32.

English colonial projects in America. He served as the secretary for Anthony Ashley Cooper, 1st Earl of Shaftsbury, and together they invested in the Royal African Company.³ When Cooper became one of the Lords Proprietors to invest in the new colony of Carolina, Locke joined as their secretary. In return, the Proprietors gave him a patent of four “baronies” of 12,000 acres each and named “Locke Island” in the territory, where he dreamed of establishing an “empire of repose and letters.”⁴ As secretary for the Proprietors, he also drafted the *Fundamental Constitutions* for Carolina. In it, he infamously supported and likely helped to write the law granting “every freeman” in Carolina “absolute power and Authority over his Negro slaves, of what opinion or religion soever.”⁵

For Locke, the champion of natural freedom, slavery—the ultimate expression of absolutist power that he so abhorred—somehow became permissible in South Carolina with little justification.⁶ South Carolina shared much in common with Jamaica. Both of the colonies were settled by Barbadian migrants, shaped by Stuart policies in the seventeenth century, and achieved tremendous prosperity by the middle of the eighteenth century. Both of the colonies also supported the absolute power of the slaveholder. The social and cultural similarities shared by South Carolina and Jamaica, and Locke’s direct and indirect role in designing colonial societies, remains a fascinating subject. Nevertheless, his paradoxical treatment of slavery also reveals, on an existential level, the evolving nature of freedom in slaveholding societies during the early modern period.

³ He earned £400 in 1674 and £200 more in 1675 from his investment. James Farr, “Locke, Natural Law, and New World Slavery,” *Political Theory* 36 (2008): 499.

⁴ Ibid., 500.

⁵ Ibid.

⁶ Ibid., 501.

Rather than question the morality of slaveholding, or the material and immaterial benefits they derived from it, colonists fully and wholeheartedly embraced the practice. Locke's justification of chattel slavery without offering an explanation for its justness, while uncharacteristic of Locke, merely articulated in plain and simple legal terms an unspoken assumption. English people in Barbados and Virginia, and then Jamaica and South Carolina, claimed the right to "absolute power and authority" over enslaved Africans without explaining or justifying their actions on moral or religious grounds. The rapidity with which they took up slaveholding is staggering. In 1670, when John Locke drafted the *Fundamental Constitutions*, a roughly equal number of free and enslaved people lived in Jamaica; when he published *The Second Treatise of Government* twenty years later, the ratio was nearly seven to one. Following Locke's death during the first few decades of the eighteenth century, this number rose to ten to one.

My research is largely concerned with explaining how this historical phenomenon occurred on a local and personal level. Free women's activities and the dynamics between the sexes provide important insights into the nature of power and authority in colonial society. Colonists broke with traditions that constrained women's legal, financial, sexual, and social autonomy. While similar changes were occurring in Europe and other parts of America, the alterations to tradition were more dramatic in Jamaica because slavery was more extreme. The laws regulating slaves, the lack of attention to controlling women, and a permissive sexual culture all contributed to the creation of a society where the status of freedom came to matter more than gender as a signifier of legal and social power.

We know what the laws defining slavery were, but what did it mean to be free in Jamaica? Free women and men championed a new individualistic freedom in the colony. The distant Crown and Church exerted power weakly from the top down. From the end of the seventeenth century and into the eighteenth century, as fears of absolutism continued to plague Britain, colonists asserted the absolute power of the individual. The individual's right to hold slaves as property became a sacrosanct, crucial aspect of freedom. Here, again, Locke is useful, for it was a kind of freedom that he articulated. A society based on natural freedom, Locke proposed in *The Second Treatise of Government*, needed to revise its treatment of women, gender, and property. Patriarchal customs such as coverture contradicted natural law, Locke argued: the "husband could not forfeit" "the wife's share whether her own labour or compact gave her a title to it."⁷ As free individuals, women had as much of a natural right to property as men who could not violate this right. In Jamaica, women used equity measures or deferred from marrying altogether to assert and protect their rights to property.

Individual freedom also entailed greater sexual autonomy. No longer could women's sexual behaviors be regulated to the degree they were in Britain or elsewhere in early America. As free individuals, they claimed similar personal liberties as men. Most importantly, freedom was defined as the "absolute authority and power" over enslaved people. Colonial laws asserted and protected this freedom, which vested the individual with the legal right to buy and sell other individuals who were automatically defined as slaves: no explanation was required or given. The laws also permitted the individual to coerce, torture, and even kill another. These laws were unprecedented, and they invested free men and women with equal authority over slaves.

⁷ Locke, *The Second Treatise of Government*, 85.

In Jamaica, freedom and slavery were intertwined and mutually constitutive, rather than oppositional. The right to own human beings as property and the right to enact terrible violence upon slaves defined the individual's freedom. Both of these rights were sanctioned and enforced by the state. Freedom was thus constituted by violence or the threat of violence, by the individual's unmitigated right to do physical and psychological harm to another. Freedom in Jamaica gave extraordinary power to colonists, irrespective of gender and often race. Only absolutist rulers could claim the same degree of power in Europe.

Chattel slavery created an epistemological rupture with British religious and political custom. The scale of the British slave trade, the widespread usage of slave labor in America, and the massive population of enslaved Africans forcibly transported to places like Jamaica incited one of, if not the most, important historical transformation of the early modern period. Slavery made American colonies like Jamaica considerably different from European society. It altered the social landscape. Free women played a role in bringing about this change. In turn, slavery altered free women's social positions, often for the better.

No longer should we define slavery as an ideologically patriarchal or paternalistic social relationship. Such definitions cloak and distort the very powerful contrasts between customary European power relations and social orders against the very different and more gender-neutral slaveholding society. While certainly premised upon inequality, the patriarchal relationship between a husband and his wife, or a father and his son, were not equivalent to the "absolute authority and power" wielded by free men and women over slaves. Removing the masks of patriarchy and paternalism reveals women's pervasive,

ongoing involvement in and benefit from chattel slavery. In turn, studying women's activities and gender relations uncovers the consequences of individual freedom and liberty in a society of slaves.

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